

Cultural Diffusion and Cultural Appropriation

By Philip Carl Salzman

Anthropologists have long known that one of the major origins of culture is diffusion, the spreading of culture from one place, one population, one society to another.¹ Since the beginning of mankind, every culture developed and evolved through both internal innovation and borrowing from outsiders. This is not debated; it is a fact of human history. It can easily be illustrated by well-known historical examples.

The languages we know as Spanish and French are classed together as Romance languages, because they were adopted and adapted from the Latin of the Romans who conquered the tribes of what is now Spain and France. What we know now as English, is a result of the mixing of Germanic Anglo-Saxon and Norman French. The home of the Semitic language Arabic is the Arabian Peninsula, but its spread throughout Egypt, and North Africa, followed Arab conquests, with Arabic being adopted by the subject populations, while Egyptian and Berber fell into eclipse. The spread of English around the world, now as the language of science and business, followed the expansion of the British, but the adoption of English continues long after the retreat of the British. Russian was established throughout Central Asia by the expansion of the Russian and later Soviet empires. Today, some Central Asian republics, such as Kyrgyzstan, maintain Russian as an official language. Chinese is the dominant language of the Chinese heartland, but now the language used by Mongols, Turks, and Tibetans under the sway of China. Imperial conquests were not chosen by their recipients, but the imperial languages often were, in some cases entirely superceding local languages.

Religions are not all local inventions, but often are borrowed. Christianity was born in ancient Israel, and originally seen as another form of Judaism, which is not surprising, because Jesus and his followers were all Jews, and the basic ideas of one God and a messiah were integral parts of Judaism. Islam adopted Jewish monotheism and the entire list of Jewish prophets, plus Jesus and Mary, all of whom are claimed to be Muslims, as well as many Jewish customs such as circumcision and the ban on pork. Christianity and Islam have been adopted in many parts of the world. In the East, there have been adoptions and borrowing among Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Jainism, among others.

Although all cultures include practical knowledge and applied technology, modern science and industry were developed in Western Europe during the Enlightenment and agricultural and industrial revolutions. Other European countries followed to a greater or lesser degree, as did the Americas, borrowing the knowledge generated by these revolutions. The demonstrated superiority of science and industry in technology led to them being adopted widely in the world. Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, have borrowed and mastered both science and industry, with China and India rapidly catching up. Science and industry serve as examples of culture evolved in one culture centre defusing around the world, borrowed by other peoples and cultures to improve and enrich their lives.

People around the world have borrowed from each other's cuisine. Hamburgers, pasta, pad thai, bagels, frankfurters, pizza, Chinese, curry, and barbeque have been integrated into popular consumption in many cultures. All of these "foreign" foods are what we serve regularly in our home. Styles of clothes are also widely borrowed. I usually wear an Australian, kangaroo skin hat. Music too is inspired by others' music, synthesized, and then borrowed and transformed by others. Western music from European classical to American rock and roll has been adopted around the world. Rock and roll and jazz drew on black music, which included elements carried from Africa. Dance too: Latin dances, Scottish dances, Western dances, Irish dances, all danced by anyone and everyone. Our daily life is rife with examples of cultural borrowing.

Recently, a moral or moralizing approach has been taken to cultural borrowing by various commentators and social critics, an approach which deems some borrowing bad, or even evil, and labels it "cultural appropriation."²

The examples are myriad, creative, and in some cases, surprising.

According to a piece written by a student at Louisiana State University, white women styling their eyebrows to make them look fuller is an example of cultural appropriation. "Current American eyebrow culture also shows a prime example of the cultural appropriation in the country," Lynne Bunch writes in an article for the Daily Reveille, the school's official student newspaper.³

Yoga and zumba have also been criticized as cultural appropriation by white people, thus violating the intellectual property of their cultures of origin.⁴ Fashion accessories are also being policed for cultural appropriation. "Latina students at Pitzer College, in California, recently chastised white women for wearing hoop earrings, an allegedly Hispanic fashion." So too with hair styling. "At Hampshire College, a student was charged with assaulting a white member of an opposing basketball team after insisting that the player's braids appropriated minority hairstyles."⁵ Music too, must not be borrowed or even referred to. "...[Canadian] federal NDP leadership candidate Niki Ashton, ... back in March tweeted "Like Beyoncé says, to the left. Time for an unapologetic left turn for the # NDP, for social, racial, enviro and economic justice. The Vancouver chapter of Black Lives Matter tweeted a demand that Ashton retract her appropriation of Beyoncé."⁶

Some cases of cultural appropriation are of long standing: The Florida State football team, the Seminoles, the mascot a warrior on horseback, are named after the regional Seminole tribe. However, the close collaboration between the team and the Seminole tribe—the mascot's warrior costume was made by the Seminoles—has protected the name from criticism. Not so the Washington Redskins, whose name and logo was deemed offensive by native activists and by no less than President Obama, who used his influence, without success, to have the name changed. A *Washington Post* national poll of American Indians showed that 90% did not find the name offensive.⁷

The poll was denounced as racist by the native activists, and the poll continues to face efforts to debunk it. In Canada, a First Nations activist sued to keep the Cleveland Indians from playing in Toronto, or at least using its name and logo, but his application failed in court.⁸

However morally indignant may be complainants about cultural appropriation, they have not grasped the basic fact of culture that every culture is a result of borrowing from earlier cultures and neighbouring cultures.

Historian Jonathan Zimmerman makes the point about hoop earrings, claimed as property of California Hispanics:

Take hoop earrings, which date to ancient Assyria. In Nimrud, located in present-day Iraq, there's a depiction of King Ashurnasirpal II (884-859 B.C.) wearing thick hoop earrings. The ancient Greeks and the Romans wore them, too; so did pirates in many parts of the Western world, who believed that hoop earrings contained healing powers or would protect them from drowning.⁹

Zimmerman reminds us of the well known essay by anthropologist Ralph Linton [who] noted in a wry 1936 [rejoinder](#) to 100-percent Americanism. "Our solid American citizen," Linton began, "awakens in a bed built on a pattern which originated in the Near East but which was modified in Northern Europe before it was transmitted to America." Then the American removes his pajamas — "a garment invented in India" — and washes with soap, "invented by the ancient Gauls."

Another error of accusers of cultural appropriation is the assumption that a culture is a known and closed inventory, when in fact culture is open, with flows in all directions, and constantly in process, developing and changing. This is a point acknowledged by Rosemary J. Coombe in her anti-appropriation essay "The Properties of Culture and the Possession of Identity:

For Native people in Canada, culture is not a fixed and frozen entity that can be objectified in reified forms that express its identity, but an ongoing living process that cannot be severed from the ecological relationships in which it lives and grows. By dividing ideas and expressions, oral traditions and written forms, intangible works and cultural objects, the law rips asunder what many First Nations people view as integrally related, freezing into categories what Native people find flowing in relationships. For those sympathetic to their ends to attempt to reduce these claims to assertions of intellectual property rights is simultaneously to neglect significant dimensions of Native aspiration and impose colonial juridical categories on postcolonial struggles in a fashion that reenacts the cultural violence of colonialization.¹⁰

In other words, identifying First Nations culture as an inventory of beliefs and objects misunderstands its dynamic nature, and, I would add, the dynamic nature of all cultures. Zimmerman makes the point that we continue to imagine that every current-day practice descends from some kind of cultural Garden of Eden, where each ethnic or racial group existed in unalloyed form. But there's no singular "Latina" culture, anymore than there's a singular "American" one. Indeed, the mostly left-wing quest for cultural purity bears an eerie echo to the right-wing fantasy of national purity,...¹¹

Attacks on cultural appropriation appear to have a racial element, with criticism of whites by or on behalf of people(s) of colour, but not by whites directed at non-whites. Whites are not indignant when African Americans straighten their hair or colour it blond. Nor when African Americans speak English rather than African languages. Likewise, non-Hispanics have not complained that Hispanics have borrowed their language from the Romans; nor have whites complained about non-whites learning modern science, a product of the West. Jews do not complain about Christians and Muslims having stolen their God, Messiah, torah, prophets, and religion, or about non-Jews eating bagels, even if they put forbidden ham or bacon on them.

So what accusations of cultural appropriation seem to boil down to is an attempt to frame whites as morally wrong. In other words, cultural appropriation is little more than racial politics by other means. Furthermore, we have seen that those complaining about cultural appropriation are a small number of self-appointed

radicals who do not represent the views of larger populations. The underlying racism of these radicals should not be given credibility by accepting their complaints. Most complaints about cultural appropriation are little more than silly; but the underlying racism is more serious, an evil that should be discouraged.

About the Author



Philip Carl Salzman received his B.A from Antioch College, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, and he is Professor of Anthropology at McGill University. He founded the Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and its international journal, *Nomadic Peoples*, for which he received the IUAES Gold Award. In recent years, he has been a Senior Fellow at the University of St. Andrews, an Open Society International Scholar at the American University of Central Asia, an Erasmus Mundus International Fellow at the University of Catania, and a Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney, Australia. He has engaged in extensive ethnographic field research in Baluchistan (Iran), Gujarat and Rajasthan (India), and Sardinia (Italy) which has provided the foundation for many articles in academic journals, and for books such as *The Anthropology of Real Life: Events in Human Experience* (1999), *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (2000) (winner of the Premio Pitrop-Salomone Marino Award), *Understanding Culture: An Introduction of Anthropological Theory* (2001), *Pastoralists: Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (2004), *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (2008), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab-Israel Conflict* (2008), and *Thinking Anthropologically* 3rd Ed, (2010). His latest book is *Classic Comparative Anthropology: Studies from the Tradition* (2012). In public affairs, he was a member of Middle East Strategy at Harvard (2008-2010), a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2004-2012), and is currently a member of the Academic Council of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Studies, a Fellow of the Middle East Forum (2015-), and a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2016-). He has published articles and reports in the Middle East Forum, Gatestone Institute, the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research, and the Macdonald Laurier Institute.

¹ (1) “Diffusionism” by Robert Lawless, in *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, H. James Bix, editor, Sage 2006 (2) “Diffusion” by Peter J. Hugill, in *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, David Levinson & Melvin Ember, editors, Henry Holt, 1996 (3)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-cultural_diffusion.

² (1) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_appropriation (2)

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-conversation-africa/cultural-appropriation-wh_b_10585184.html

³ http://www.nationalreview.com/article/444346/student-op-ed-eyebrows-cultural-appropriation-white-women-kendall-jenner?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Daily%20Trending%20Email%20Reoccurring-%20Monday%20to%20Thursday%202017-01-27&utm_term=NR5PM%20Actives

⁴ http://www.nationalreview.com/article/440935/barnard-event-zumba-cultural-appropriation?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Daily%20Trending%20Email%20Reoccurring-%20Monday%20to%20Thursday%202016-10-11&utm_term=NR5PM%20Actives

⁵ http://www.chronicle.com/article/On-Maybellene-and/239619?cid=wb&utm_source=wb&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=2752f2ced58f4d86ae8ddf43e2daa863&elq=fb2f870380424df3ad557c00ba7656c9&elqaid=13262&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=5502

⁶ *National Post* pp. 1, 6-7, 24 June 2017.

⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/new-poll-finds-9-in-10-native-americans-arent-offended-by-redskins-name/2016/05/18/3ea11cfa-161a-11e6-924d-838753295f9a_story.html

⁸ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/activist-seeks-injunction-against-use-of-cleveland-indians-name-and-logo/article32382639/>

⁹ http://www.chronicle.com/article/On-Maybellene-and/239619?cid=wb&utm_source=wb&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=2752f2ced58f4d86ae8ddf43e2daa863&elq=fb2f870380424df3ad557c00ba7656c9&elqaid=13262&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=5502

¹⁰ ” (in *Multiculturalism and Immigration in Canada*, edited by Elspeth Cameron, Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2004, 133-158)

¹¹ http://www.chronicle.com/article/On-Maybellene-and/239619?cid=wb&utm_source=wb&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=2752f2ced58f4d86ae8ddf43e2daa863&elq=fb2f870380424df3ad557c00ba7656c9&elqaid=13262&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=5502