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# Cultural Appropriation and Fashion: A Line to Clarify the Line

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Eastern Kentucky University

**Cultural Appropriation and Fashion: A Line to Clarify the Line**

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# Cultural Appropriation and Fashion: A Line to Clarify the Line

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## **Abstract**

In this creative project, the idea of cultural appropriation in fashion is explored and interpreted into mood boards and garment sketches inspired by different cultures. Cultural appropriation occurs when dominant groups take or “borrow” styles from marginalized groups, who face oppression or have been stigmatized for their cultural practices throughout history. In order to prevent appropriation from happening in fashion, it is important to educate and implement certain business styles in order to stay ethical. Understanding the history of cultural appropriation is important in moving forward and cutting down on the phenomenon in the fashion industry. By looking at examples in the upcoming pages, the difference between inspiration and appropriation will be explained, examples of correct and corrupt business moves will be laid out and ideas for change will be suggested. There will also be examples of mood boards with inspiration from 4 different cultures: Africa, India, Native American and East Asian.

*Keywords: cultural appropriation, fashion, design, fashion industry, ethics.*

## Background

Borrowing from other cultures has been happening since the beginning of time. It is a way of survival, it is a way of creativity, it's an art form and a lifestyle. But there comes a point where inspiration from a culture becomes stealing or "appropriation." Cultural appropriation happens when dominant groups take or "borrow" styles from marginalized groups, who face oppression or have been stigmatized for their cultural practices throughout history.<sup>1</sup> This can happen in almost every aspect of culture: food, fashion, art, music, beauty, home décor and more. But perhaps one of the largest perpetrators are the fashion and beauty industries. From clothing styles, to prints, to hairstyles and makeup, it is easy to cross the line of appropriation. In 2015, Australian fashion designer Kokon To Zai created a caribou skin parka for the runway. It was adorned with primal patterns and luxurious fur—it was a subjectively beautiful design. The problem with this was this particular parka was designed in 1920 to protect an Inuit shaman named Ava. The parka was designed by the shaman himself and both the hands and the small man printed on the front were thought to protect him. The designer never contacted the family for permission and never offered compensation. A relative who dug up the old pictures of her ancestor discovered the ripped-off look from the runway show. Her and the rest of the family were upset and tried on multiple occasions to contact the designer to no avail. Once the story caught mainstream media and vendors began taking the parka (retailed at

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<sup>1</sup> Franchesca Ramsey. "7 Myths about Cultural Appropriation DEBUNKED!" *MTV News*, November 11, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXeJdHrGOuI>.

<sup>2</sup> Ted Stansfield. "KTZ responds to outcry over Inuit design rip-off", *Dazed Digital*



\$925 CDN in some cases) off of their shelves, the European designer issued a public apology regarding the look.<sup>2</sup>

Another example of cultural appropriation in more everyday use is “festival style.” Over recent years, it has become a fad to attend music festivals and wear bold outfits that show personal flare and create a riff in wearable every day style. Some trends however, have been offensive to large masses of cultural populations. Things like Native American headdresses and the bindi have been paraded around these festivals as “fun” and “exotic” accessories. The problem with this is those accessories originate from sacred backgrounds.

Chiefs and warriors wear Native American headdresses as a sign of dominance and achievement, with each feather on the headdress having been earned by an act of bravery or compassion. So when a young woman at Bonnaroo adorns herself with a headdress resembling an original from a native tribe, it is offensive to the group whom holds it sacred. This is similar for the use of the bindi. Hindu women wear bindis for many reasons—with different colors having different uses—but primarily to represent their devotion to their religion and their spirit in some way. These are symbols with deep meaning to a select population that are essentially being exploited for fashion purposes.

Cultural appropriation can be found in more sectors than just clothing—hair, make-up, lifestyle, food, home décor, music and art can all be perpetrators. Fashion and go hand-in-hand with a lot of these with everything in pop-culture being

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<sup>2</sup> Ted Stansfield. “KTZ responds to outcry over Inuit design rip-off”, *Dazed Digital Fashion News*, 2015, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/28635/1/ktz-responds-to-outcry-over-inuit-design-rip-off>.

intertwined as it is. Beauty is arguably fashion's closest relative and one of the most ridiculed in relation to cultural appropriation. Often, traditionally African-American hairstyles are used in mainstream culture as "fashionable" or the "hot new thing." This is troubling because not only have corn rows, dread locks and bantu knots been around for centuries, people of color who wear these styles have been ridiculed for wearing them. Afros are considered unprofessional and locks are stigmatized, implying drug use or untidiness. On the 2015 Grammy's edition of *Fashion Police*, E! News anchor Giuliana Rancic commented of actor/singer, Zendaya Coleman's, dreadlocked hair. Rancic started by saying Zendaya is too high fashion for the look, and it was too "boho" for her. She added, "I feel like she smells like patchouli oil... or weed." To say this about someone based solely on a hairstyle shows the stigma against these traditional black looks. This stigma runs so deep that some schools and business make it against their dress code for girls to wear their hair natural, forbidding afros and braids. This is blatant discrimination and just happened last year in a school in Louisville, Kentucky. It should speak volumes that black features such as big lips or a fuller figure have been caricatured and made fun of in past generations, deeming those features less-than or "undesirable," while people like the Kardashians have brought a new light to being curvy and voluptuous.

However, there are some people that are paving the way for the industry in their efforts to connect and stay ethical in their business endeavors. One of them is Oskar Metsavaht with the brand Osklen. In Spring 2016 the Brazilian designer used inspiration from Asháninka, an indigenous people who live in the Brazilian and

Peruvian rainforest.<sup>3</sup> He didn't just stop at his inspiration from these people, he dove into their culture by visiting them on site, he learned about them individually, and he keeps in touch with the tribe leaders. The tribe is passionate about the rain forest and keeping it in tact, so Osklen puts a portion of their profit from the line towards the fight against deforestation in their area. Metsavaht said in an interview with the Huffington Post that, "Osklen signed a contract with the tribe in which they received a set amount of money stipulated by the tribe, because they preferred this way. So the Asháninka were able to plan in advance what investments to make with these funds."<sup>4</sup>

Another example of a company who is paying tribute to another culture in a real way is Jessica Sanchez with "Santa Isla." This small company makes intricate beadwork necklaces inspired by the Emberá Chami, an ethnic group in Colombia known for a variety of artisanal crafts, including pottery and beadwork. The young Latin-Canadian woman was on a trip in Columbia when she ran across a booth with these necklaces. She was inspired to start her own company making these types of necklaces, but before she did, she made sure to learn about the women in this group and why they make what they make. The necklaces are large and drape partially over the shoulders. The women in this group believe that women carry the world on their shoulders and this is a way to symbolize that. Sanchez has some of the beadwork done in Columbia and works closely with the people in Emberá Chami.

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<sup>3</sup> Krithika Varagur. "Is This The Right Way For Fashion To Do Cultural Appropriation?" *The Huffington Post*, November 5, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/fashion-cultural-appropriation\\_us\\_5632295ce4b00aa54a4ce639](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/fashion-cultural-appropriation_us_5632295ce4b00aa54a4ce639).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

“It was really important that it was not just me,” Sanchez said. “I’m just the bridge ... Santa Isla is nothing without them, and it’s important that they are acknowledged.”<sup>5</sup>

## **The Project**

### **Concept**

Moving forward, I feel it would be ideal if brands and consumers were more aware of what they are creating and consuming. The goal of this project is to show examples of inspiration that are not stealing from any certain group but using elements of design such as color, shape, lines, and texture; combined with principles such as pattern, rhythm, unity and balance; to create looks with an essence of various cultures. For the purposes of this project, I chose broad cultural concepts such as: Africa, East Asia, Native American, and Indian cultures. These large groups could of course be narrowed down to different groups with different beliefs and practices, and if I were to legitimize any of these ideas, I would look deeper and find a group to connect with and learn specifically about. One of the weaknesses of this project is the broad ground that I try to fit into these boards. Looking into traditional customs of these vast cultures and trying to fit them into four general inspiration boards left me left with an essence of each that could certainly be delved into on a deeper level—and would be if I expanded this project.

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<sup>5</sup> Natalie Jesionka, “Is This The Right Way For Fashion To Do Cultural Appropriation?” *The Muse*, <https://www.themuse.com/advice/jess-sanchez-of-santa-isla-how-i-built-a-jewelry-company-that-means-something>.

## **Africa**

With this culture, the core inspiration was the colors, shapes, and patterns found in traditional African garments. This culture is so deeply rooted in rhythm, vibrancy, and boldness that I wanted to convey that in the garments. While the colors in a lot of the garments I saw were vibrant, there weren't many tones used. They are mostly blunt and basic shades of red, yellow, green, blue and orange. So I stuck to these rich tones to create rhythmic patterns with bold lines and asymmetrical balance. I chose to showcase the dress on this board because I felt it encompassed everything at once. It has the lines, shapes and colors that were inspired by what I saw of the traditional and current African styles. If I were to move forward with this line, I would want to research the different regions of Africa and learn the differences of each region. I would want to find a specific group or tribe and delve into their way of life and learn their struggles. After designing the line, I would want to give back to them in some way as Osklen has with the Asháninka people.

## **India**

I have always viewed Indian culture through a mystical looking glass of sorts because of the extravagance and richness of their garments. Everything is adorned in gold and fancy trim, with bright colors and plentiful jewelry. Everything about the Indian aesthetic has always caught my eye. So when I was thinking of cultures to use as inspiration this was a no-brainer. Everything in traditional Indian culture has a meaning. A lot of the time the clothes or accessories or colors being used hold some spiritual relevance and therefore it is important to tread carefully on this ground when using it as an inspiration. For example, at wedding ceremonies, the bride and

groom wear red to symbolize prosperity and fertility. Being mindful about the spiritual connections would be important in moving forward with an India-inspired clothing line. It would also be important to talk to people of that culture and her first-hand what their garments mean to them and their everyday life. In my sketches, I used color and structure to show my appreciation for their looks. The sari is often one-shouldered and has layers, so I tried to use that in my sketches starting out. I chose to stick to rich purple tones, green and gold because they are vibrant and rich.

### **Native American**

I chose to do a Native American inspired board because it is one of the cultures that so-often gets appropriated. As mentioned above, many use Native American face paint and headdresses as accessories as music festivals and theme-parties. In America, Native people have been repressed for generations, something that many citizens today feel uncomfortable with. But as recent events have shown at Standing Rock<sup>6</sup>, the problems these people face are still relevant and need to be noticed. So it was important to me to shed light on the fact that these people are still around and their traditions are still alive. There are entire populations of people who still celebrate their Native roots and take traditions seriously, and they should be given the correct recognition for their craft or items inspired—and in some cases stolen—from their craft. So for my board I wanted to stick to basic colors—red, blue, white, grey and black. These tones reminded me of water fire and rock, which are of the

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<sup>6</sup> Cassi Alexandra. "In Their Own Words: The 'Water Protectors' Of Standing Rock" *NPR U.S.*, December 11, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/12/11/505147166/in-their-own-words-the-water-protectors-of-standing-rock>.

land. I wanted to use lines and shapes representative of the feathers and face paint that so many people exploit and take out of context. So in the outfit showcased on the board, I used abstract shapes and thick lines that I saw in face paintings while doing my research and some shapes as feathers as a way to use the headdresses as inspiration, without disrespecting tradition by actually wearing one. Moving forward I would want to look into specific tribes and learn about them. Then I could dedicate a number of garments to each tribe or do separate lines for each tribe. Once again, it would be important to learn about their struggles and give back to them in some way.

### **East Asia**

Like most cultures, trying to group East Asia altogether is tricky and can get confused if you don't do proper research. In the past, it seems people want to group all the people of that region together, in which case creates a blurred line between Chinese and Japanese people. These cultures are different any anyone from that region would be offended if grouped into the wrong culture. This happened with Katy Perry used geisha style in her 2013 American Music Awards performance. "Between the lack of Asian women on stage, the heavy-handed use of bowing and shuffling around in the choreography, and the ethno-confused set and costume design, Perry presented her viewers a one-dimensional Eastern fantasy drawn by a Western eye right out of the gate," wrote *Mic* contributor Phyllis Heitjan at the time of the performance.<sup>7</sup> In my designs I took the kimono that is often fantasized or

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<sup>7</sup> Derrick Clifton. "5 Reasons Katy Perry Is Pop Music's Worst Cultural Appropriator" *Identities.mic*, <https://mic.com/articles/95444/5-reasons-katy-perry-is-pop-music-s-worst-cultural-appropriator#.ls3rxCYVp>.

misunderstood and used it as inspiration for structure. I stuck with soft colors and lines to represent the feminine nature of the geisha without mocking her. Moving forward I would want to be well versed in the history of East-Asian culture so I could accurately represent it.

## **Conclusion**

After completing my project, I saw where there could be major growth in each portion. Right now the various cultures are still broad. I would be interesting in going deeper in each one. The purpose of this project was to bring awareness to the problem of cultural appropriation. In order to grow the project, I would get more technical on how to solve this problem in the fashion world. For now, it is important for people to be informed and for the problem to be realized on a large scale. This issue has gotten more recognition in the past decade than ever before which is a start. It was hard for me to find scholarly articles on the subject because it is a new concept on the scholarly level, although it has been a discussion in the pop culture world for generations—especially in repressed circles.

*“Just because something isn’t happening to you, doesn’t mean it’s not happening.”*

–Sam White, internet social activist.



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