Cultural Appropriation As A Confusing Topic

Have you ever seen someone dress up as Pocahontas for Halloween? At the time, you may not have thought anything of it, but that is a common example of cultural appropriation. According to Australian indigenious rights activist Henrietta Marrie, “Cultural appropriation, or cultural misappropriation, is often controversial when members of a dominant culture appropriate from disadvantaged minority cultures.” At the same time, minority cultures can also culturally appropriate from others. Having said that, not all cultural appropriation is negative.

Cultural appropriation is the adoption of elements of one culture by members of another culture. The phrase “Cultural appropriation” is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “The unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.” In simple terms, it is when one adopts something from a culture that is not their own – a way of speaking, piece of clothing, a hairstyle, a religious symbol, and more.

Cultural appropriation is a fairly new term, and a recent subject of academic study. The term came about in the 1980s regarding discussions of post-colonial critiques of Western expansionism. Cultural appropriation itself however has been documented as early as the 17th century, done with clothing by George IV of the United Kingdom, appropriating the traditional dress of diverse Eastern European and Islamic countries. Many different groups of people culturally appropriated other groups during the course of history. A popular and commonly unknown example of cultural appropriation is the appropriation of the Mexican sombrero, associated with the mestizo peasant class introduced by Spanish colonials during the 18th century. The sombrero was adapted into the cowboy hat worn by American cowboys after the US Civil War.

Cultural appropriation is still happening today in the modern era, all around the world. For example, in 2017, Topshop, a fashion retail store, caused controversy by selling Chinese inspired clothing that imitated the pattern of the keffiyeh. Many fashion designers and models, as popular and recent as Victoria’s Secret in 2012, have featured imitations of Native American warbonnets in their fashion shows. In the early 2000s in the west, it became popular to get tribal tattoos which are appropriated from African and Polynesian culture. Sisters Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian have been publicly wearing cornrows and braids, appropriating black features and cultures for years.

Cultural appropriation however is not always a bad thing. When one appropriates something, they do so because it is suitable or compatible for the specific use, even if they are ignorant to the origins. When different societies come together, it is inevitable that they begin to learn from one another, in order for the betterment of each society to be achieved. Cultural appropriation has always sometimes had positive instances. People learn from each other for the betterment of their society, from medicine, house-wear and clothing, governing styles, foods and cooking styles, and more. There are times when cultural appropriation is very inappropriate, but there are also times when it is beneficial. The term cultural appropriation has only recently been shown in a negative light.

Many people have many different opinions on how to engage with other cultures respectfully. When looking for a limit of cultural appropriation, they may vary depending on who you ask. Personally, I'd say a fair middle ground would be to always educate yourself. Before wearing, acting, or speaking; Always educate yourself on the culture you are interested in. Do your research and learn the history, meaning, and significance of the culture and what they practice. It is disrespectful and ignorant to blindly flaunt jewelry with a cross on it, without having any association or care about the religion associated with it. After you educate yourself, then I feel it is appropriate for you to respectfully engage with other cultures and their practices. There should be limits with how far you go, remaining respectful and aware that you are not originally from that culture.

Going back to my original point, cultural appropriation is a confusing topic. It can very easily be offensive and inappropriate, especially in today's society which has turned the term into a completely negative meaning. In some cases it can be positive, respectful, and knowledgeable when done the right way.