Cultural appropriation: Against inspiration?

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This blog post comes from a debate organised by the University of Manchester Anthropology undergraduate society. The title of the debate was "This house believes cultural inspiration is misunderstood as cultural appropriation", which my two teammates and I argued against. The room was packed, and it was evident from brief conversations that I had before the debate that for many this was a very timely topic, yet difficult to navigate. As is often the case with anthropology debates, because of the complexity and ambivalences contained

within the motion, the two sides did not end up in direct opposition but rather presented their argument in different, often overlapping, perspectives. Both sides made compelling points in favour and against the motion.

In this post I only convey my own points on how anthropology can help us better make sense of cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation as a term implies the harmful adoption of one culture's practices and artefacts by another. This is a suggestion which gestures to other anthropological debates revolving around cultural ownership, belonging and representation, which are foundational to our discipline. Despite this, my impression is that the notion of cultural appropriation has not received adequate attention by anthropologists. This might be because cultural appropriation in a way is the "original sin" (Hage, 2015: 74) of anthropology. Since detaching itself from its colonial past (at least in intention), much of anthropology can be understood as a constant process of negotiating ethnographic consent of accessing, documenting and justly representing the culture of others. It might also be the case that over time we have developed more nuanced concepts to describe the power dynamics contained within the straight-forward suggestion of cultural appropriation – such as ethnocentrism, structural violence, intersectionality, and so on.

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Nevertheless, importance must also be given to the ways cultural appropriation is negotiated and contested in public forums. Cultural appropriation has gained particular traction in online media over the past few years. But why does this particular notion manifest so powerfully in collective, public understandings of cultural property at this specific juncture of time?

The starting point I made in the debate is that caution is needed when people conflate cultural appropriation with inspiration.

Inspiration is a modality of creation which largely takes place in Western, capitalist settings. For indigenous people and non-capitalist societies, creativity is customarily embedded in social relations of reciprocity, responsibility, hierarchy and knowledge transmission. On the other hand, the stereotype of the gifted, inspired individual is relatively recent, individualistic notion, which obviates the social significance of creativity in non-individualistic cultures. Perhaps this is the reason several ethnographers study cultural creativity and so few studying

inspiration: because, in certain ways, the notion of inspiration is anti-social, since it eludes the relational dynamics of knowledge exchange through which creativity otherwise takes place. In other words, inspiration is already a skewed way of thinking about cultural appropriation, since it situates creativity in a capitalist modality: inspiration, as a way of thinking, removes creativity from its social relations and allows individuals to appropriate elements for the sake of novelty.

For example, famous European artists such as Picasso and Gaugin have long been critiqued as culturally appropriating (i.e. being inspired) from other cultures in their work.

I am not suggesting that all inspiration through which 'high' art is produced should be done away with. Instead, I suggest that modalities of creativity can be cultivated amongst artists (and also fashion designers, entrepreneurs, etc.) which are more attuned and participatory of the social, political and economic specificities of the culture they are inspired by. For example, although largely the result of inspiration, ethnography can be understood as a creative process which is not the result of appropriation, but rather the ethnographer becoming embedded in a socio-cultural milieu, fostering, and nourishing meaningful and often political relations with the people he or she writes on (or 'writes with' to use one of Isabelle Stengers' terms).

Besides inspiration, two other ways by which accusations of cultural appropriation are diffused are the suggestions of fluidity and historicity. The first – fluidity – attempts to reverse accusation of appropriation by making the point that in a globalised, cosmopolitan world, everything, whether it's a custom, symbol, commodity and so on, is subject to global flows and relational entanglements and cannot be confined to a single cultural milieu. This is of course nothing new, and something anthropologists have long written on. One only has to skim through Eric Wolf's seminal *Europe and the People Without History* (1982) to realise that Europe – or the world for that matter – is not only the history of cities, kingdoms and States, but also the history of traders, travellers,

migrants and nomads – in other words populations which often are left behind in historical accounts.

There is no denying that "everything flows", to quote ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, and that the history of the world one history of cross-cultural encounters, dialogues and disputes. Yet, so much is left unattended when one uses the suggestion of fluidity as a way of thinking about cultural appropriation: A

better space to think instead unfolds once we start questioning the context and ways by which fluidity is achieved. Fluidity can be the result of several scenarios, good and bad: it could be the result of gifting and knowledge exchange. Stories of several cultures around the world are similar because the exchange of stories can be understood as a gift of sorts, and hence a socially desirable way to achieve cross-cultural dialogue. But fluidity can also be the result of theft, war, and slavery.

In other words, cultural fluidity, as an analytic, provides little nuisance in explicating the social dynamics and power asymmetries of cultural appropriation.

Which brings me to my second point: fluidity, despite thought of as intrinsic to human sociality, is not a given. Rather, there are ways and tactics by which fluidity can be stopped. Capitalism is commonly understood as a phenomenon where everything flows: of a deterritorialised world where commodities, people and corporations cannot be confined to a single location or society. Yet, capitalism is not only the result of fluidity, it's also the result of blockages in fluidity or, otherwise said, private property. If capitalism creates power inequalities, it is exactly because there are instances where capital and commodities are stopped from flowing and are instead accumulated in the hands of the few.

There are certain mechanisms by which such blockages are produced, such as copyrights, patents and trademarks. To return to a previous point, such legal processes can be understood as a form of creativity which is predicated on inspiration and the assumption of a gifted individual which comes up with a unique idea, design, logo and so on. The reason non-capitalist societies have not developed understandings of patent and copyright is, once again, because creation is a collective phenomenon and practice, embedded in social relations (but counter to this point of mine, read Simon Harrison's work which examines ritual through relations of copyright. Thank you to *AllegraLab* editors for pointing this out).

Inspiration is largely the creative modality under which capitalism grows, by which surplus is achieved, and as such must also be protected.

This is also the reason that when *reverse* cultural appropriation takes place – that is to say examples where indigenous societies appropriate corporate symbols and logos in their creative practices – it is not labelled and understood as cultural appropriation but rather as copying, counterfeiting or as a cargo cult.

The other way by which people attempt to make sense of accusations of cultural appropriation is that of historicising cultural elements on which debate is waged. For example, in a recent case where two Latino schoolgirls admonished whites for appropriating their culture by wearing hoop earrings, the reaction of many was to suggest that hoop earrings are not uniquely Latino, but have been used for centuries, dating back to the Sumerian civilisation and Mycenaean Greece. Such treatment of cultural appropriation, however, also obviates the social dynamics out of which accusations of cultural appropriation emerge.

Simply put, to historicise cultural elements as a response to such accusations is akin to saying the Nazi swastika is not really a fascist symbol but one deeply rooted in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy: it's true, but it kind of misses the point.

Accusations of cultural appropriation are not directed to specific objects or symbols *per se*, but to the broader dimensions of meaning and political economy in which objects are embedded. Neither meaning, politics or economics are static dimensions of society. Cultural symbols, objects and practices acquire different meanings and significance according to the social and political context in which they are situated at a specific moment in time. Some people might want to preserve their cultural heritage more than others, as is the case for societies facing the loss of land, natural resources and heritage. Some 'detective work' is hence needed as to why specific groups, cultures and populations accuse others of cultural appropriation. In other words, I think of importance isn't whether

accusations of cultural appropriation are right or wrong, but the dynamics and interests out which accusations emerge. By deflecting knee-jerk reaction of historicisation and fluidity, and by instead fleshing out their particularities, anthropologists can attend to anxieties, urgencies, as well as the racial, gender and power asymmetries through which accusations of cultural appropriation manifest.

References:

Hage, Ghassan. 2015. *Alter-Politics*. Melbourne: University Press.

Wolf, Eric. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

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