

## List of Terms/Context

### **Culture**

The customary beliefs, social forms, attitudes, material traits, values, and practices characteristic of a particular racial, religious, or social group

### **Appropriate**

To take or make use of something without authority or right

### **Cultural Appropriation**

Legally allowable, but objected to by group's whose cultures are exploited

Individuals frequently use ethnic groups' cultural artifacts, artistry, customs, and/or styles even though they are not part of that groups' culture or ancestral heritage. This is a pattern often associated with white American tourists and individuals raised to believe that modifying ancient forms into new, modified versions for personal or business purposes is acceptable.

The negative connotation associated with this term arises because all too often the use of another's cultural art or customs involves 1) commodification and 2) desecration (see below).

### **Commodify**

To turn something that has intrinsic value (such as a work of art) into a commodity

Making a profit off of something that has traditionally been created to exemplify another's cultural tradition often involves exploitation of the cultural group of origin. The economic benefits that come from commodification rarely benefit the cultural group of origin. Instead, commodification undermines a culture's ability to maintain its activities and artistry as previously practiced.

### **Desecrate**

To violate the sanctity of something

To treat something considered sacred in a disrespectful, irreverent, or outrageous manner

Any time a group's spiritual forms, objects, or practices are used in ways that deviate from its original intentions, there is risk of rendering them profane, dangerous, and/or offensive.

Very often, commodification and desecration are found together.

## **Cultural Exchange vs. Cultural Appropriation**

As people migrate and interact with cultures other than their own, it is normal for native populations, visitors, and/or immigrant groups to begin to adopt some of the customs and practices of groups they have newly encountered. When this level of exchange is mutually beneficial and done with respect, appreciation for the participating cultural/ethnic groups and/or individuals may be heightened.

On the other hand, when one group takes cultural forms from another group and then utilizes and/or modifies those forms in ways that are economically exploitative or disrespectful, it negates the claim that there is an underlying appreciation for the culture of origin.

Some examples include: 1) the wearing of the Hindu “bindi” in the center of the forehead as an ornament without the corresponding spiritual understanding and practice or 2) use of Native American objects considered sacred as decorative pieces for use in a home or business without the corresponding spiritual understanding and practice

(see Handout 1.2.3 for additional examples and resources)

## **Whiteness, Cultural Loss, and Appropriation (Book Excerpt)**

Unfortunately, so many whites have trampled people of color as we ran away from our whiteness that many people of color are highly suspect when whites demonstrate an interest in their culture and participate in traditional ceremonies and practices or wear their cultural symbols and dress.

If we can understand that our cultural exploration or adoption is often warily perceived as related to appropriation, the exploitation of another group’s culture for another’s benefit, and a history of oppressive behaviors, then we can more effectively explain our intention to people of color. If we can avoid becoming defensive, we might be able to hear the concerns of people of color, then be offered the opportunity to explain the respect we have for the cultural tradition or faith. Further, we can enter a discussion about how our interest in a particular culture is related to our own sense of cultural loss. Even more helpful is an ability to discuss how we understand our approach in terms of our relationship with our own whiteness and the social and economic benefits that have traditionally come with membership in that group.

Overall, the more we understand ourselves, the reasons for our actions, and how our cultural explorations might be perceived in relationship to an oppressive history, the more we are able to navigate our way through challenging conversations, build authentic relationships and break down the wounds built up over years of injury. Perhaps even more important, we might be able to avoid enacting a disrespectful form of appropriation.