

# Contents

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Unit 1	Cultural Appropriation	004
Unit 2	Masculine vs Feminine Cultures	012
Unit 3	Eco-Responsibility	020
Unit 4	Modern Family	028
Unit 5	Government	036
Unit 6	Religions	044
Unit 7	Dress Code	052



Unit 8	New Digital Systems for Commercial Air Travel	060
Unit 9	Unique Festivals—The Running of the Bulls	068
Unit 10	Hollywood and Bollywood	076
Unit 11	Immigration	084
Unit 12	Gift-Giving Etiquette	092
Unit 13	Sports	100
Unit 14	Aging	108



UNIT

# 1

## Cultural Appropriation







### Think & Discuss

- 1** What is the girl in the picture wearing?
- 2** Do you think what the girl is wearing is a product of her culture? Why / Why not?

## BRAINSTORMING

- 1 What elements make up someone's culture?
- 2 Look up the words "appropriate" and "appreciate" in a dictionary. What might it mean to appropriate or appreciate someone else's culture?
- 3 Do you think you can ever fully appreciate a culture you are not part of? How? Why?
- 4 Where do you get information about cultures other than your own?
- 5 What depictions of different cultures have you seen in the media? Do you think these representations are accurate?
- 6 What are the consequences of generalizing about people based on these depictions?
- 7 Have you ever worn anything just because it looked cool or cute without realizing it was from another culture?

## GUIDED READING



Originating in the 1980s in academic discussions about colonialism and the treatment of minority cultures, the concept of cultural appropriation has in recent years sparked fierce debate in both academic circles and the mainstream media. The term describes the adoption of elements of one culture—traditional dress, hairstyles, iconography, music, dance, or cuisine—by members of another and is seen as particularly harmful when members of a dominant culture appropriate cultural elements from minorities and historically oppressed groups.

Those who argue against cultural appropriation feel that by removing a cultural element from its original context, the appropriator is able to "play" temporarily at being from that culture without really understanding it. In this manner the cultural element is reduced to something fun or exotic, which disrespects and in some cases desecrates the item in the eyes of its original culture.



### ◀ Native American feathered headdress

One prominent example of this occurred in 2012, when Victoria's Secret model Karlie Kloss wore a Native American feathered headdress during a runway show. Many Native Americans were outraged by the act, as in many of their communities, these headdresses

represent respect, power, and responsibility and must be earned. Reducing them to a fashionable outfit that anyone can buy and wear, therefore, erases that meaning.

In a similar vein, many Halloween costumes depicting stereotyped or “sexy” versions of various national dresses (such as “Gypsy,” “Mexican,” or “Japanese geisha”) are also regarded as cultural appropriation as they not only treat traditional dress as a commercial costume but also perpetuate negative or misleading images of the target culture.

However, these viewpoints are not without their critics. Some argue that being overly sensitive about cultural appropriation prohibits self-expression (particularly among artists who may derive inspiration from cultures not their own) and reinforces cultural segregation. In their view, interaction between cultures is generally harmless and often even beneficial, encouraging diversity and empathy among those involved. It is also unfortunately true that the term “cultural appropriation” is commonly misunderstood and misapplied to benign acts such as enjoying food from different cultures or simply learning about another culture.

While exchanges between cultures can undoubtedly result in mutually beneficial outcomes—fusion cuisines and new musical styles, for example—the line between genuine appreciation and equal exchange on the one hand and insensitive appropriation and exploitation on the other is, unfortunately, not always clear. The issue must therefore be approached with sensitivity, care, and understanding if offence and harm are to be avoided.

▼ Karlie Kloss wore a feathered headdress during a runway show, which infuriated many Native Americans. (Source: CBS News)



#### World Victoria's Secret apologizes for use of headdress



'They are spitting on our culture,' Navajo Nation spokesman says

The Associated Press - Posted: Nov 13, 2012 4:09 PM ET | Last Updated: November 14, 2012



▼ women in Japanese geisha clothing



## READING COMPREHENSION

- 1 When is cultural appropriation considered particularly harmful?
- 2 Why was the 2012 incident of a Victoria's Secret model wearing a Native American headdress considered cultural appropriation?
- 3 Why are certain Halloween costumes considered examples of cultural appropriation?
- 4 Why are some people critical of claims of cultural appropriation?
- 5 Do you think cooking another culture's cuisine is cultural appropriation?
- 6 Can you think of an example of cultural appropriation that isn't mentioned in the passage?
- 7 How would you feel if someone borrowed an element from your culture? What would it take for that borrowing to be considered cultural appropriation in your eyes?

## DIALOGUE

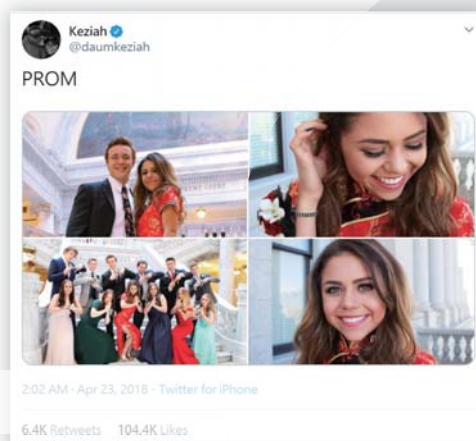


*Eric is reading an article on his phone.*

- Lily Hey, Eric. What are you up to?
- Eric I'm just reading an article about a teenage girl in the US who's gotten a lot of criticism online.
- Lily Oh? What did she do?


▼ A teenage American girl wore a traditional Chinese *qipao* to her school prom and caused a huge controversy online.

(Source: <https://twitter.com/daumkeziah/status/988115815068139520>)





- Eric** She wore a traditional Chinese *qipao* to her school prom and posted pictures of herself wearing it on social media. The girl isn't Chinese herself, so some people are accusing her of cultural appropriation.
- Lily** Let me see. *(She reads part of the article.)* Hmm, well it doesn't sound like she was wearing it to make fun of anyone or promote stereotypes. She was just wearing it because it was a beautiful, modest gown, and it sounds like she knew a bit about the cultural significance of the dress, too, so what's the problem?
- Eric** Well, a lot of the people criticizing her are Chinese Americans. In the US, Chinese-American immigrants are often discriminated against, so many Chinese Americans are seeing it as someone from a dominant group stealing an aspect of their culture and using it to look cool on social media.
- Lily** What about people in China? How have they reacted to it?
- Eric** That's what's surprising. Most people in China seem to have no problem with it. Lots of Chinese netizens have said they are happy that she's promoting Chinese culture. Most of them see it as cultural appreciation, not appropriation.
- Lily** It's a pretty complicated topic, isn't it? Appreciation versus appropriation.
- Eric** It is. I'm not quite sure how I feel about it. I don't think her intentions were bad, and I can see why Chinese people outside the US might see it as a positive thing, but I can also see how Chinese Americans would feel marginalized by her actions given their history and the challenges a lot of young Chinese-Americans have fitting into American society, which is predominantly white.
- Lily** Right. I think when you're making a judgment about cultural appropriation there are a lot of things to consider. And the power dynamics between two groups in a society is definitely a major factor in making that judgment.



◀ Non-Chinese people wearing Chinese *qipao* may be regarded as an example of cultural appropriation.



## DIALOGUE DISCUSSION

- 1 Why did the teenage girl in the article Eric was reading get into trouble?
- 2 What were her motivations in doing what she did?
- 3 Which group of people were particularly critical of her actions?
- 4 What aspect of the story surprised Eric?
- 5 What does Lily think is a major factor in making a judgment on whether or not something counts as cultural appropriation?
- 6 Would you wear the traditional dress of another culture to a formal event? Why / Why not?

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Chicano culture is an American subculture created by Mexican Americans, primarily in the southern United States. Now often negatively associated with L.A. street gangs, Chicano culture actually has its roots in the Mexican-American empowerment movement which spanned the 1940s through the 1970s. Chicano fashion is characterized by tattoos, shorts with high socks, jerseys, and bandanas for men and masculine workwear, big hoop earrings, and bold makeup for women. Lowriders—cars with lowered bodies and heavily tinted windows—are also a prominent part of the culture.

In the 1990s, with the help of mass media, Chicano culture became popular internationally, but especially so in Japan. Now, there are thousands of people in major cities across Japan who dress and live like Chicanos.



▲ bandana



◀ lowrider

At first glance this would appear to be a clear case of cultural appropriation. Many of these Japanese “Chicanos” are interested only in the stereotyped version of Chicano culture they see represented in Hollywood movies. Some, however, feel a strong connection with Mexican Americans and do their utmost to really engage with and pay respect to the culture they are copying. This is particularly true of many Japanese women, who feel that Chicano culture allows them to rebel against Japan’s strict and unfair gender norms.

While at first glance it may be denounced as a textbook example of cultural appropriation, the Chicano movement in Japan raises a lot of complex questions about who gets to take part in a particular culture and for what reasons.

Watch the following short film about Japanese Chicano culture, then discuss it in a small group.



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1LqF03UUdc&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1LqF03UUdc&feature=emb_logo)

You can use the following questions to guide your conversation.

- 1 Were there any moments in the film that particularly stood out for you? Why?
- 2 Did anything surprise you? Did you see anything that challenged your ideas about cultural appropriation?
- 3 After watching the film, would you consider Japanese Chicano culture a form of cultural appropriation or cultural appreciation, or perhaps something less clear-cut?
- 4 Does this film remind you of anything else you’ve read or seen? Can you connect what you’ve seen here with your own life experience?
- 5 How would you feel if your culture were being mimicked in this way by a group of people in another country?

Chicano tattoos

(cc by Pitbull Tattoo Thailand) ►

