**What Is Cultural Appropriation and Why Is It Wrong? By Nadra Kareem Nittle**http://racerelations.about.com/od/diversitymatters/fl/What-Is-Cultural-Appropriation-and-Why-Is-It-Wrong.htm Updated June 22, 2015.  
  
The United States has long been known as a melting pot and, more recently, as a salad bowl. Because people from hundreds of different ethnic backgrounds make up the nation’s population, it’s not surprising that at times cultural groups rub off on each other. Americans who grow up in diverse communities may pick up the dialect, customs and religious traditions of the cultural groups that surround them.

Cultural appropriation is an entirely different matter. It has little to do with one’s exposure to and familiarity with different cultures. Instead, cultural appropriation typically involves members of a dominant group exploiting the culture of less privileged groups — often with little understanding of the latter’s history, experience and traditions.

**Defining Cultural Appropriation**

Susan Scafidi, a law professor at Fordham University, told Jezebel.com that it’s difficult to give a concise explanation of cultural appropriation. The author of Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law, defined cultural appropriation as follows:

“Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects.”

In the United States, cultural appropriation almost always involves members of the dominant culture (or those who identify with it) “borrowing” from the cultures of minority groups.

African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans and indigenous peoples generally tend to emerge as the groups targeted for cultural appropriation. Black music and dance, Native American fashions, decorations and cultural symbols and Asian martial arts and dress have all fallen prey to cultural appropriation.

**Examples of Cultural Appropriation**  
“Borrowing” is a key component of cultural appropriation.

In the 1950s, white musicians borrowed the musical stylings of their black counterparts. Because African Americans weren’t widely accepted in U.S. society at that time, record executives chose to have white recording artists replicate the sound of black musicians. This led to musical forms such as rock-n-roll being largely associated with whites in spite of the fact that black musicians were pioneers of the art form. This move also had financial consequences, as many of the black musicians who helped pave the way for rock-n-roll’s success never saw a dime for their contributions to the music.

In the late 20th century and early 21st century, cultural appropriation remains a concern. Musicians such as Madonna, Gwen Stefani and Miley Cyrus have all been accused of cultural appropriation. Madonna, for instance, popularized the form of personal expression known as voguing, which began in black and Latino sectors of the gay community. Madonna has also used Latin America as a backdrop in a music video and appeared in attire with roots in Asia, as has Gwen Stefani who faced criticism for her fixation on Harajuku culture from Japan.

In 2013, Miley Cyrus became the pop star most associated with cultural appropriation. During recorded and live performances, the former child star began to twerk, a dance style with roots in the African-American community. Writer Hadley Freeman of The Guardian particularly took issue with  Cyrus’ twerking at the MTV Video Music Awards in August 2013.

“On stage as well as in her video she used [the tedious trope of having black women as her backing singers, there only to be fondled by her and to admire her wiggling derriere](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrUvu1mlWco&t=1m28s),” Freeman pointed out. “Cyrus is explicitly imitating crunk music videos and the sort of hip-hop she finds so edgy – she has said, bless her, that she feels she is Lil' Kim inside and she loves ‘hood music’ – and the effect was not of a homage but of a minstrel show, with a young wealthy woman from the South doing a garish imitation of black music and reducing black dancers to background fodder and black women to exaggerated sex objects.”

**Why Cultural Appropriation Is a Problem**  
Cultural appropriation remains a concern for a variety of reasons. For one, this sort of “borrowing” is exploitative because it robs minority groups of the credit they deserve. Art and music forms that originated with minority groups come to be associated with members of the dominant group. As a result, the dominant group is deemed innovative and edgy, while the disadvantaged groups they “borrow” from continue to face negative stereotypes that imply they’re lacking in intelligence and creativity. In addition, when members of a dominant group appropriate the cultures of others, they often reinforce stereotypes about minority groups.

When singer Katy Perry performed as a geisha at the American Music Awards in November 2013, she described it as an homage to Asian culture. Asian Americans disagreed with this assessment, declaring her performance “yellowface.” The Wall Street Journal’s Jeff Yang said that her performance did not celebrate Asian culture but misrepresented it entirely. He found it particularly problematic that Perry dressed as a geisha to perform the song “Unconditonally,” which describes a woman who pledges to love her man no matter what.

“The thing is, while a bucket of toner can strip the geisha makeup off of Perry’s face, nothing can remove the demeaning and harmful iconography of the lotus blossom from the West’s perception of Asian women — a stereotype that presents them as servile, passive,” Yang wrote, “and as Perry would have it, ‘unconditional’ worshippers of their men, willing to pay any price and weather any kind of abuse in order to keep him happy.”

Nico Lang, a guest blogger for the Los Angeles Times, pointed out in a post that cultural appropriation highlights the power imbalance that remains between those in power and those who’ve been historically marginalized. As such, a member of a dominant group can assume the traditional dress of a minority group for a Halloween party or a musical performance. Yet, they remain blissfully unaware of the roots of such dress and the challenges those who originated it have faced in Western society.