

# **Reflections of Liberian War: Cultural Appropriation or Authentic Art**

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## **Abstract**

**This article investigated the controversial topic of cultural appropriation. The significant topic was related to artistic endeavors, especially the arena of painting. The subject of cultural appropriation is rooted in all of the arts, and this article encompasses several broad-scope artistic endeavors. To propose what is or is not culturally appropriated, or wrong, is unprecedented. Artistic work must be examined independently. Cultural appropriation is a serious matter, but not all non-natives appropriate art; often they appreciate a culture's art. This article adds to the conversation on cultural appropriation and strengthens the discussion that must ensue.**

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## **Reflections of Liberian War: Cultural Appropriation or Authentic Art Introduction**

Cultural appropriation is very controversial, especially since individuals from rich and powerful majorities often appropriate from disadvantaged minority cultures (Young, 2010). The consensus seems to be that cultural appropriation may not be harmful when practiced under the right conditions (Eaton & Gaskell, 2009). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2011) defines "appropriation" as "The making of a thing private property...; taking as one's own or to one's own use." Almost all artists appropriate in one way or another when they borrow ideas (Young, 2010). Eric Clapton is an often cited example of cultural appropriation. When Clapton covered Bob Marley's *I Shot the Sheriff* (1973) his appropriation was easy to see. He took an obvious culturally iconic song and re-worked it to his satisfaction. Marley's version did not sell nearly as

well as Clapton's re-make. Plus, some might say Clapton's version is inferior to Marley's, which might have significant impact on the idea that he culturally appropriated the song. However, when Clapton released his duet with B. B. King (*Riding with the King*, 2000) there would be argument that this was not cultural appropriation. The two blues musicians sang together and often it was difficult to discern which man was singing. Does this make it less a matter of appropriation?

James O. Young, (2007), the "Father of Cultural Appropriation" offers this generalization:

it would be scandalous if Stonehenge were to be found anywhere but England, though it changed hands as recently as 1915 (for £6600). It does not matter that the current inhabitants of England did not make Stonehenge. It does not matter that the English invaded and defeated the descendants of the people who built the monument. It does not even matter that ancient Celts are turning over in their graves because it is in the hands of the English. Stonehenge is what is sometimes called the "mana" of the English. It is part and parcel of who the English are as a culture and they ought to have it. Its sale to an American businessman, and relocation to Druid World in Southern California, would have been scandalously wrong. (p. 121)

So, the concept of cultural appropriation is not as open and shut as one might assume. There are clear concepts that should be adhered to, but cultural appropriation should be manageable.

### **Personal Artistic Endeavors from Edie's Point of View**

Cultural appropriation is a topic I am only beginning to understand. I was first confronted with it when a person from academia questioned my right to create paintings depicting scenes from Africa because I am not African. I felt defensive and indignant. As an artist, I championed the right to paint whatever inspired me especially if it evolved from deeply personal experience; however, this challenge opened my eyes to the issue of cultural appropriation and the need to both examine my motivations as well as be prepared to defend my reasons for choosing African subject matter for my work. Facing this issue, I better understand the sensitive nature of cultural heritage and how treasures have been stolen and abused by many. Now I work toward making sure than anything culturally related work I create is also supported by sensitivity, permission where necessary, and constructive moral motivations.

Ju Pong Lin, in a 2010 lecture, asked the participants "Why Appropriate?" Some of Lin's reasons included, "to expose the truth, make political critique, to question assumptions about culture, to trouble the boundaries between cultures, and because it's fun." My work addresses the first reason because I want to expose the truth about the Liberian war and make a political statement about the immorality of war. Very few Americans can even tell you where Liberia is and its connections to the United States, much less anything about the war that raged there. Rwanda and the Sudan headlined often in the media, but Liberia was insignificant and a minor story shoved under the carpet. If my work creates a dialogue to help the viewer gain history and understanding of Liberia and its war, then I believe the cultural appropriation is justified.

Secondly, my work questions and troubles the boundaries between cultures. My life experiences are not typical of the majority of Americans because I have had the opportunity to relate very closely with other cultures. Born in Indonesia to American parents, my early childhood experiences in the 1960's included the Communists takeover attempt. Powerful anti-American sentiment, gave me a sense of what it feels like to be discriminated against simply because of one's culture. I do not in equate my childhood experience with, for example, the years and years of discrimination against African Americans in the Deep South, but I do trouble the boundaries with my ability to empathize and relate on a smaller scale. My parents protected me from any severe consequences, but I remember being chased in my own yard and being beaten and bitten by some young Indonesian school children because I was American. This is my experience along with learning to speak several dialects of Indonesian before I even learned English; I claim Bandung as my hometown and place of birth. Indonesia is a richly beautiful and cultural place to which I feel proud to have a connection and claim with honor.

Living and working in Liberia, West Africa before the civil war, my Liberian coworkers accepted me immediately. I formed deep friendships that felt little different to me from friendships anywhere else in my life, but my American supervisor reprimanded me for spending too much time with Liberians and staying in their homes. The Americans were uncomfortable with my lack of boundaries, but my willingness to be part of the culture provided me rich experiences that otherwise I would never have had. Troubling the boundaries has its benefits.

The more significant question, for me, is why would I not want to express my love of Africa and its peoples in my art? It is fun, rewarding, honoring, and a part of who I am. I welcome the opportunity to explain these thoughts and feelings to anyone who questions whether or not it is appropriate for me to paint images of Africa. My motivations are morally strong and are always an effort toward aesthetically informed work. I offer positive reflection on the good of a culture rather than intention of harm. Yes, I speak to the harm of war and corruption, but in a global sense of activism towards peace for all. Rudinow (1994) describes authenticity as a value, the credibility of which comes from having the appropriate relationship with the original source. Baugh (1988) strengthens my feelings on this subject matter with this:

authenticity involves assuming responsibility for one's existence in its entirety... One does this by conferring a meaning upon one's self and circumstances, not just by taking up an attitude towards them that reveals them in a certain light, but by acting to change what one encounters as having already been there, in accordance with a value one has chosen. (p. 478)

I believe that I have done all this with my work on Liberia.

Ultimately I question how and who decides what kinds of cultural appropriations are right or wrong and how this effects what I do as an artist. I certainly want to be sensitive to all kinds of issues, especially cultural issues, and to address them with compassion and respect. But I also want the courage to have a voice in my global community, to be willing to take risks, and to take a stand for what I believe is right and just.

Part of what distinguishes the aesthetic quality is whether or not an artist appropriates in an innovative or non-innovative manner. I prefer the example of non-African American musicians who appropriate the style and techniques of the blues musicians, yet use them in their own unique or innovative way. This argument is valid because it points to technique rather than

experience. Good artists can study and learn techniques and apply them to their work even if they do not share the same experiences. I agree that an artist from within a culture is not guaranteed the ability to create aesthetically successful work in the style of that culture. All cultures produce both good and poor quality art.

When discussing authenticity and appropriation, Young (2010) addressed the personal genius of an artist and returned to the idea of innovative and non-innovative content appropriation as way of determining the authenticity of a work. He discussed several types of authenticity but in the end determined that cultural appropriation does not create an aesthetic handicap that dooms an outsider artist to inauthentic creativity (pp. 46-55).

Third world countries, especially, have been trapped into a tourism industry in order to survive. Objects are reproduced in mass that have sacred and ceremonial meanings to meet the demands of tourists. The income provided by tourism would seem to be a good thing; this may be a questionable practice. One example that comes to mind is the sale of African masks and artifacts. Many masks are produced solely for the purpose of sales; however I have seen many ancient masks in markets and galleries both in Africa and the United States, and as a result, I worry these cultures are losing some of their irreplaceable treasures. The history of culturally valuable objects being stolen or sold results in another issue concerning the dangers of cultural appropriation. While exquisitely beautiful treasures I would love to purchase and have displayed in my home, I have to reconsider the rightness of this. Our consumerism and market economy is forcing poorer cultures to sell their treasures in order to survive.

James Young's conclusions (2010) about cultural appropriation are both thorough and sensitive to the seriousness of the subject. I agree that in most situations indigenous and minority groups are not harmed by artists who appropriate content or subjects from their cultures. Artists have played a big role in educating a wider audience and encouraging appreciation and respect of other cultures.

### **Conclusions**

Much harm has occurred from prejudice, racism, intolerance, and egocentric groups other than artists, for culturally conscious artists bring understanding, caring, and severely needed attention to many disadvantaged cultures. Young (2010) claims that culture is a family resemblance concept. A collection of people who share a range of cultural traits is, simply put, a culture. Young (2010) continues the thought with: "Most people will belong to several cultures at a time" (p. 15).

Suppose an artist receives permission from an appropriate source to use stories, songs, even creations that have been developed in a culture. Is this not what has been described above? We have a case for unobjectionable content appropriation. If subject matter cannot be owned (Young, 2010), then is it not possible to obtain cultural items and use them correctly in works of art? Young (2010) openly claims; "there can be no blanket condemnation of cultural appropriation" (p. 28), and "Artists who appropriate content, styles, or motifs do not need to worry that their works will necessarily be inauthentic or other-wise aesthetically flawed" (p. 152).

Baugh (1998) states that a work of art should be considered authentic when it makes its possibilities its own by relating them to its situation. He continues by stating that works of art

have their own “world,” they can make their very own by revealing it in a singular, specific manner.

It should be remembered, however, that cultural appropriation is a slippery idea. This concept may best be addressed on a case-by-case basis. To comprehensively propose what is or is not culturally appropriated, or wrong, is unprecedented. Each artist and each work must be examined independently. Cultural appropriation is a serious matter, but not all non-natives appropriate art – they appreciate a culture’s art and honor it by including it in their personal lives and artistic statements.

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