

# Food for Thought? The Cultural Appropriation of Food in Contemporary Media

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## *Abstract*

*The paper discusses the concept of cultural appropriation in contemporary media, which has recently caused heated debates. It focuses on food as the subject of controversy and follows a sample of recent cases where the production and sale of culturally authentic food items have led to concerns among people of various ethnic backgrounds. The author raises the question whether the striving for greater cultural sensibility, sensitivity and diversity has, in fact, created more division.*

*Keywords: food, cultural appropriation, cultural sensibility and sensitivity, contemporary media*

## **Introduction**

On the face of it, a cancelled yoga class at the University of Ottawa in 2015<sup>1</sup>, a pair of shoes designed by the pop singer Katy Perry in 2019<sup>2</sup> and a high school prom dress worn by the American Twitter user and influencer Keziah<sup>3</sup> might not seem to have much in common. However, these cases and the ensuing opprobrium online have all contributed to bringing the term *cultural appropriation* into wider cultural discourse. In these days of, on the one hand, heightened sensitivity and sensibility and, on the other, increased reactionary behaviour (all fuelled by the instant (over)reaction mechanism of social media), it seems one only has to go online for a few moments to find the latest controversy involving the claiming or appropriating of one culture's practices or rituals by another. In the days preceding and following the preparation of the original conference contribution that this article expands upon, both Madonna<sup>4</sup> and the reality show-cum-entrepreneur Kim Kardashian<sup>5</sup> came under scrutiny for co-opting cultural markers that were not their own. Madonna was criticized for attending an awards ceremony wearing an outfit inspired by traditional Berber dress while Kardashian faced a backlash from the Japanese community for launching a range of female underwear (or *shapewear* as she calls it) under the name *Kimono*. While she has since renamed the lingerie *SKIMS* (her capitals), the initial shock and disappointment shown was huge. One might ask whether these are examples of a growing trend among westerners to adopt, integrate and appropriate the traditional and sometimes sacred cultural practices of a specific cultural group or is the backlash just another side-effect of our over-digitalised lives nowadays where online comments and reaction, likes and dislikes have become more important than searching to truly understand not just our behaviour but also the behaviour of cultures and peoples outside our own group.

The present paper will try to bring the subject of food into the wider debate on cultural appropriation. Food is not often a topic in the discourse on appreciation versus appropriation as it seems an innocuous enough item more conducive to cultural exchange. Furthermore, where is the line between authentic tribute and appropriation, and is it really possible to 'understand' a culture's food without being part of it? By using three recent case studies where food (or, more accurately, the reproduction of authentic or traditional foodstuffs by

people from outside of the source culture) has been at the centre of accusations of cultural appropriation, it is the intention of the present contribution to create space for a deeper consideration of the role food plays in every distinct national or ethnic cultural group and subgroup. Is each of us, as a cultural actor, only free to enjoy the food a given group of people prepares and eats while actively being present and immersed in that culture or can those ideas, flavours and recipes be brought home by us in order to recreate those culinary cultural experiences as well as possible? On the other hand, attention will be paid to the question whether the cultural appropriation of food is the price one pays for globalisation and greater freedom to travel and explore the world. The more one travels, the more one experiences, the more one wants to replicate those tastes, experiences, etc., at home. As the philosopher Barthes (1979: 14) put it in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* – “every exploration is an appropriation”.

### **Cultural Appropriation: A Background**

While *cultural appropriation* might just seem like 21<sup>st</sup> century buzzwords, the concept has been around for almost 50 years. Cultural appropriation was first conceptualised, academically, by the author Coutts-Smith (1976) in the publication *Some General Observations on the Concept of Cultural Colonialism* and, as the title suggests, it was initially specific to the study and discourse of colonialism. Although Coutts-Smith did not actually use the words *cultural appropriation*, he was the first author to synthesize Marxist ideas of class appropriation (the idea that the dominant social and economic class appropriates and defines high culture markers) with cultural colonialism, which is, in other words, how western cultures claim or appropriate cultural forms (e.g. art forms) originating from peoples who have suffered oppression or are/were the victims of colonisation. By the 1990s, the term had become established within academic discourse and has been a part of popular discourse since 2012.

According to Bradley (2015: 12), cultural appropriation is the “adoption or theft of icons, rituals, aesthetic standards and behavior from one culture or subculture by another”, while Young (2005: 136) describes it as “the taking of something produced by members of one culture by members of another”. Cultural appropriation comes from contact between two cultures, one often a dominant or imperial culture and the other a cultural-ethnic group or minority. Bradley (2015, 12), states that cultural appropriation can be triggered by any or all of the following:

- imperialism;
- capitalism;
- oppression;
- assimilation.

Rogers (2006: 477) divided cultural appropriation into four subtypes:

- Exploitative cultural appropriation – in which members of the dominant culture appropriate without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation. In the US, an example of this would be Elvis Presley’s appropriation of music originated by African Americans;

- Appropriation as cultural dominance, in colonised contexts, is the use of a dominant culture's element by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been imposed;
- Appropriation as cultural exchange reflects reciprocal exchange of cultural elements between cultures with roughly equal levels of power;
- Appropriation as transculturation describes a situation in which cultural elements created by multiple cultures, such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic.

After discussing this list with a friend and colleague, I would suggest a fifth form which can be termed *voluntary cultural appropriation* whereby people living outside of their own culture appropriate it to better fit the tastes of the dominant culture in which they live. As examples, one can consider the often culturally inauthentic dishes served in Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese or Indian restaurants in the UK and the USA (for more on this, cf. note 12 at the end of this text).

### **Cultural Appropriation: Where and why?**

Small nations or minority groups face great difficulties establishing their identities when bordered by powerful states and national groups thus it is “crucial [to] preserve unity within established borders” (Magocsi 1975: 4). However, it is often *their* cultural practices which are appropriated by larger, dominant groups, rather than the other way round. The way in which smaller cultural groups interact with bigger, dominant groups has two levels; local and sovereign/imperial. The local level refers to the language (or dialect) spoken, the customs practised, songs, literature, food, folk dress and the religion practised by a group of people which, while different to the majority population of a country, has a close affiliation to other minority cultures in neighbouring regions while the sovereign or imperial level is more geographical and political and takes into account the minority group's relationship to the dominant one in terms of its location, often on the periphery of the dominant culture. This peripherality allows such groups to maintain a “degree of cultural separation” (Porter 2013: 313) which is eroded or endangered by cultural appropriation.

As can be seen, while cultural appropriation as an academic and, later, popular piece of terminology is a late 20<sup>th</sup> / early 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon, the practice of cultural appropriation is much older. If one takes even a casual glance at 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture, one can find plentiful evidence of cultural appropriation or accusations thereof. Musicians such as Elvis Presley (as mentioned above), Paul Simon and Peter Gabriel – to name but three – have all been accused of actual or historical cultural appropriation<sup>6</sup>, the yin-yang symbol has a history of being co-opted for fashion credibility or financial gain since the counter culture movements of the 1960s and even the Hollywood great, Elizabeth Taylor, was accused of cultural appropriation for one of her signature roles – Cleopatra<sup>7</sup>. More modern examples of this phenomenon include the French couture label Chanel's \$1,930 luxury boomerang and the outfitters Canada Goose selling “authentic” Inuit coats online for \$5,000 – \$7,500 (Reuters 2019). Cultural appropriation may occur for some noble reasons – political critique or the questioning of assumptions for example – however, cultural appropriation is driven in the main by its profitability; it sells and sells well.

Cultural appropriation occurs without any real understanding of why the original culture took part in these activities. As examples here, one could cite the proliferation of dreadlocks among non-Rastafarian communities or the spread of Bindis among non-Hindu/non-Jainist women. It also occurs without knowing the meanings behind these activities and this, in turn, leads to culturally significant artefacts, practices and beliefs being converted into meaningless pop-culture or are given a completely different significance than they originally had attached to them.

## **The Cultural Importance of Food**

The preparation and consumption of food is as significant a cultural marker as language, clothing, music, religion, literature, art, or sport. Rozin (1999: 22) considers food to be “a principal means of establishing ethnic identity and distinctiveness”. Montanari (2006 Introduction) sees food as “culture when produced, prepared and eaten” whereas, for Mintz (1985: 4 quoted in Hissom 2016: 13), “what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about it are phenomenologically interrelated matters; together, they speak eloquently to the question of how we perceive ourselves in relation to others.”

Food is an immediate cultural marker, it is often many people’s first point of contact with a new culture; a traveller arrives somewhere tired, overwhelmed and hungry and food gives them some immediate comfort or reassurance that this foreign land or city is not as daunting as they might have feared. Wong (1993: 57 quoted in Hissom 2016: 20) considers food a “genuine gesture of sharing [... an] appeal for acceptance by the mainstream customer”.

However, in the modern world, which is driven by the all-pervading influence of social media, a world where it is possible to instantly share information in the form of blogs, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook posts or Tweets on any subject, from almost anywhere in the world, at the swipe or touch of a finger, food has become yet another area of popular culture to experience a surge in deliberate or perceived acts of appropriation. Like music and fashion before, food has undergone a process of cultural gentrification; food has become aspirational – the amount of time many people take to capture the perfect food selfie or the ever growing number of farmers’ markets, ‘destination’ restaurants and food fairs and fads (Caveman diets, the Street Food boom, the raw food and slow food movements to name but a few recent examples) bear witness to this trend. Food is merely the latest area of popular culture to be fetishised by TV personalities, writers, bloggers, vloggers and influencers and hand in hand with this fetishisation of food comes cultural appropriation. The American food writer and broadcaster Zimmern (2014 online<sup>8</sup>) acknowledges, with great self-awareness, that people like him are part of the problem saying “[w]e go around the world and take a look at the things people haven’t seen before and haven’t fetishised yet. And then we’ll fetishise. People to blame are folks like me who run around the world, holding up foods and saying, ‘Hey, fetishise this!’”. While one’s attitude towards the food of a particular cultural group can influence attitudes and understanding of said cultures, for Hissom (2016: 22), “members of the dominant culture are not concerned that their singular experience of cuisine represents cultural locality [but] in that singular experience representing what they believe to be an authentic cultural experience” and it is in this dichotomy between what actually *is* authentic as practised by the indigenous group and what people from an outsider group *believe* to be authentic that the cultural appropriation of food can be found.

## Cultural Appropriation of Food: Three Case Studies

Over the course of the last two years, two celebrity chefs and one world famous high street chain all became embroiled in the cultural appropriation debate leading to calls of racism, cultural ignorance and insensitivity, exploitation and abusing indigenous cultures for profit and entertainment. Firstly, the English author, cook and media personality, Jamie Oliver came under fire both in the press and online over what was then his latest range of cook-at-home dishes, sauces, spice mixes, etc. In the past, Oliver had become something of a social crusader, working closely, following the success of his show *Jamie's School Dinners* (Channel Four Television, 2004), with the British government to improve the overall quality of the meals served in UK schools. Later, he became synonymous with promoting simple, healthy meals that could be cooked quickly at home by even the most unskilled of cooks and later, in 2008, opened a chain of Italian restaurants – Jamie's Italian – which have since hit hard times (all but the three branches at Gatwick Airport closed when administrators were called in in May, 2019<sup>9</sup>). In 2018, however, Oliver angered representatives of the Afro-Caribbean community in Great Britain by launching a range inspired by the traditional jerk spice mix used in West Indian cuisine. The focus of much of the ire was the range's microwaveable rice dish, which was purported to use the above mentioned authentic jerk flavouring. The story even reached the Washington Post (2018 online<sup>10</sup>), who covered it mentioning the fact that Oliver's blend of spices did not adhere to the correct ingredients, substituting the traditional Scotch Bonnet or Bird's Eye chillies for Jalapeno peppers, which are more commonly used in Mexican and Central American cooking reporting that the rice dish by Oliver did not "contain many of the ingredients traditionally used in a Jamaican jerk marinade".

Also in 2018, the former professional footballer turned chef turned reality TV star, Gordon Ramsay hit the headlines after he announced the launch of his new show, broadcast by the National Geographic network, *Uncharted*, which would see him head to far flung destinations in search of new culinary delights and then prepare locals *their* food *his* way while they watched. Understandably, the format of *Uncharted* caused no little uproar online prompting one journalist to write: "[W]hy does it take a white chef to 'discover' [their] cuisine and present it as if it were a spectator sport?" (Sukhadwala 2018 online<sup>11</sup>). The third example of cultural appropriation involves one of the most recognisable of British brands displaying some surprising levels of cultural (in)sensitivity towards one of Britain's largest ethnic groups – Indians – and one of Britain's most popular foods – curry. The British love affair with Indian food is well documented; curry is now the UK's favourite dish (according to Morrissey-Swan<sup>12</sup> (2018) and two staples of UK Indian restaurants; Tikka Masala and Balti were thought to have been cooked for the first time in Britain – Glasgow for the Tikka Masala and Birmingham for the Balti. Earlier in 2019, the food arm of the upmarket high street store, Marks and Spencer, launched a new addition to its ready-to-eat food range. The product in question was a sweet potato Biryani wrap aimed, supposedly, at vegetarians and vegans with a penchant for Indian food. However, controversy was not far off. Firstly, M&S spelt the word "Biryani" incorrectly (on packages, it was written 'Biriyani') and then, to compound matters, commentators pointed out the inaccuracies in the recipe; an authentic Biryani is a rice-based dish, it may contain meat or be vegetarian, but the fundamental ingredient is rice and the version on sale in Marks and Spencer's stores was rice-free.

Secondly, the choice of a tortilla style wrap, more a feature of Mexican cuisine, caused further consternation and, to top it all off, the choice of sweet potato, a native plant of Central and South America, led to more anger and with one journalist accusing Marks of “taking advantage of Indian food to make money while not providing an authentic and traditional meal” (Hockaday 2019 online<sup>13</sup>).

These three cases highlight the pitfalls of cultural appropriation – a misunderstanding of authentic elements of a cultural group, fetishising the everyday elements of a group’s culture and its practices to create hype or demand, the attaching of new or false meaning to the original components and the claiming of a group’s cultural practices for financial gain or entertainment.

There is another side to the debate surrounding the cultural appropriation of food and it is that, in order for new cultures (and their food) to become known and, ultimately for the indigenous people of said culture to at least profit from the co-opting of their culture by members of the dominant, outsider group, knowledge of their food must, somehow, be spread. In the words of Qui (2015 quoted in Stevens online<sup>14</sup>), an American-Filipino chef and former winner of the Top Chef reality show, “food is not a trend, it’s heritage and culture, but in order to get exposure, it needs to get noticed” and that ‘food adventuring’, in spite of the many problems that come with it can be “a true appreciation of culinary diversity, or, more importantly, of the diverse cultures that produce the culinary delights they enjoy” (Cappielez 2015 quoted in Stevens 2015 online, cf.<sup>14</sup>). In the same 2015 article, Qui goes further by adding: “If you come from an open place, I feel that you can truly appreciate and discover a culture’s cuisine from its core”.

## Conclusion

The cultural appropriation of food, whether actual or perceived, deliberate or unintentional, has become something of a hot topic in recent years. For some it is a *cause célèbre*, every indiscretion, no matter how minor or major, is treated with equal disdain and punished to the maximum in order to show every culture the sensibility and sensitivity it deserves after centuries of oppression and imperial rule. For others, it is something of a *bête noire*; a symptom of a wider problem, proof that the politically correct, indignation-fuelled, liberal mind-set has finally run out of so-called ‘real problems’ to worry about and has turned its attention to food in order to satisfy an appetite for controversy. Whichever side one personally takes or whether that standpoint is somewhere in the middle, it is important to consider several issues in order to avoid making the same mistakes as others. The website, *everydayfeminism.com*<sup>15</sup>, has published a self-check list to help guide people through the ever more sensitive area of cultural appropriation. The main bullet points can be summarised as follows:

- Which cultural group does the item or practice that I am considering belong to?
- Is the said group oppressed and how?
- (How) Do I benefit from this?
- Is my behaviour likely to cause offence to anyone?
- Do I have a personal reason or justification to participate and engage with the practice?
- If unsure, do not do it.

Another website, *The Atlantic*<sup>16</sup>, sets out its own guidelines to avoiding cultural appropriation and includes such advice as making sure you:

- ‘Acknowledge the origins’ of any practice or ritual or behaviour;
- Do not turn the sacred into accessories;
- Remember that culture is fluid and that “cultural appropriation can sometimes be the savior of a cultural product that has faded away”;
- Remember that appropriation and diversity are not the same thing;
- Engage with other cultures on more than the aesthetic level;
- When commercial considerations are at play, remember to give credit and pay royalties if possible.

To conclude, I believe that it is possible to explore a culture and be fascinated by it without appropriating it – appropriation comes by trying to “match”, “change” or “claim” or benefit or profit from that culture without proper research. By branding every expression of culture which is different from ours outside of its original authentic context as appropriation, are we not, in fact, creating more divisions and putting up more walls than we are tearing down? The key, I think, to whether something is appropriation or not is whether something is done because of a genuine love for and attempt to understand and appreciate a culture or whether it is driven by the profit or entertainment principle. If one prepares, for example, a curry or makes pesto at home (even if one does not adhere strictly to the original, authentic, recipe) because of a love of Indian or Italian food and does not try to pass the end product off as “your own” *per se*, then it cannot be classed as appropriation. However, if one re-creates something without doing proper research or paying close attention to the meaning and significance of the cultural practice being re-created and it is done for personal gain without acknowledging the source culture, then it can be considered to be appropriation. In the words of the cartoonist Shing Yin Khor (AKA Sawdust Bear) (2014<sup>17</sup>) whose comic *Just Eat It* is an excellent resource in the ongoing and ever-changing world of cultural appropriation:

Stop thinking. Just slurp the noodle in your mouth. I don’t need you to tell me about your spiritual awakening, or your surprise at how modernized our cities are, or how charmed you were that English was so widely spoken [...] Eat, but don’t expect a gold star for your gastronomical bravery. Eat, but don’t pretend that the food lends you cultural insight into our ‘exotic’ ways. Eat, but recognize that we’ve been eating too, and what is our sustenance isn’t your adventure story. Just – eat it.

#### Notes:

1 The class was cancelled due to some ‘cultural issues’ students had with the class. The instructor added that there was a ‘cultural appropriation issue because yoga originally comes from India’.

2 Perry’s shoes featured prominent red lips and a face design in black and tan versions. The shoes were removed by stockists including Walmart over concerns that the shoes promoted and condoned the use of ‘blackface’.

3 She (Keziah) had attended her prom in Utah wearing a traditional Chinese cheongsam, or qipao, dress prompting one Twitter user to write ‘my culture is not your prom dress.’

4<https://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/fashion/madonna-s-vma-outfit-appropriation-of-the-berber-culture-1.762255>

5 While ‘Kimono’ could be argued to be merely punning on Kardashian’s name, the potential to cause offence must surely have been apparent to all involved.

6 Paul Simon's heaviest criticism came around the release of his 1986 album 'Graceland' and its 1990 follow-up 'The Rhythm of the Saints'. For both records, Simon recorded with indigenous musicians (South Africans in the case of 'Graceland' and Brazilian Amazonians for 'Rhythm') and was attacked for repackaging, for personal profit, authentic music as his own. Upon leaving Genesis in 1975, Gabriel himself became more interested in polyrhythmic music and began experimenting with non-Western sounds and musicians. His work on his solo records and, later, the creation of the World Of Music And Dance (WOMAD) festival combined with the building of his Real World studio in Box, near Bath and the establishing of the record label of the same name led to the 'world music' boom of the late 1980s/early 1990s. While Gabriel undoubtedly paved the way to global stardom for musicians like the Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour and the Pakistani Qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Gabriel was not immune to accusations of profiting on the back of other cultures' music.

Gabriel and Simon are not alone here; the world of music is littered with instances of cultural appropriation to greater and lesser degrees from Sting to Madonna to more recent examples including the New York band Vampire Weekend's use of traditional African rhythms on songs such as 'Cape Cod Kwassaa Kwassaa'.

7 A white woman playing an Egyptian queen.

8 <https://www.mmtimes.com/lifestyle/dining/14895-fetishize-this-when-food-adventuring-trivialises-cultures.html>

9 'Jamie's School Dinners' ultimately led to a broader campaign to improve the quality of school food called 'Feed Me Better', for more on the collapse of Jamie's Italian cf. <https://www.theguardian.com/food/2019/may/21/jamie-oliver-jobs-administrators-restaurants-jamies-italian>

10 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2fworld%2f2018%2f08%2f20%2fchef-jamie-oliver-accused-cultural-appropriation-his-jamaican-punchy-jerk-rice%2f%3f>

11 <https://metro.co.uk/2018/08/03/cultural-appropriation-of-food-is-not-ok-so-i-wont-be-watching-gordon-ramsay-uncharted-7791627/?ito=cshare> Ramsay is a good, high profile, example of the 'fetishisation' of food talked about by Zimmern; a representative of an outsider group raving excitedly about a new food or culinary experience which, in turn creates a buzz and a novelty value that is then exploited in the wider cultural context for profit as well, as in Ramsay's and National Geographic's case, for entertainment. A cautionary tale in this area of food fetishising is that of Quinoa. The grain, native to Bolivia and Peru, has formed a staple part of the traditional diet there for 3,000 years but has been marketed in recent years as a 'superfood' with miraculous health benefits. As a consequence of this fetishisation and the subsequent surge in demand, the crop has now become too expensive for the local growers to eat. Cf., <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/health-and-wellness/quinoa-superfood-now-too-expensive-for-poor-growers-to-eat-20150114-12nxyb.html>

12 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/food-and-drink/news/curry-became-britains-favourite-home-cooked-dish/> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2019)

13 <https://metro.co.uk/2019/01/29/top-chef-accuses-ms-of-cultural-appropriation-over-vegan-biryani-wrap-8408269/>. To provide some background, one online resource describes a Biryani as "made with meat and basmati rice, vegetables, and various types of spices. [e.g.] Hyderabadi biryani: This biryani is one of India's most popular types of biryani. It incorporates goat meat that is marinated and cooked along with the rice and is seasoned with coconut and saffron". <https://www.thespruceeats.com/all-about-biryani-1957507>

14 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/jun/01/food-adventuring-cultural-appropriation>

15 After <https://everydayfeminism.com/2016/05/avoid-cultural-appropriation/>

16 After <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/the-dos-and-donts-of-cultural-appropriation/411292/> Number one on the *Atlantic's* list - 'Blackface is never OK' - was left off my paraphrasing as I felt it should be self-evident. An example of cultural fluidity is the American jean which is nowadays made from a fabric that would be unrecognizable to the Bavarian born originator of the jean – Levi Strauss – yet America remains the cultural home of this garment if not the actual



original birthplace. One could argue further that black tea's popularity in the UK is another example of the fluidity of culture. Tea leaves cannot be grown naturally in the UK, therefore, tea cannot be considered to be authentically British but, because of trade during the British Empire, the practice of tea drinking has been very strongly associated with, especially, English culture ever since.

17 <http://www.sawdustbear.com/portfolio/just-eat-it/>

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