A Plague of Gods: Cultural Appropriation and the Resurgent Left Sacred

By Rhyd Wildermuth

A little over six years ago now, I received a demand which asked me to use my influence and this publishing platform to help denounce someone.

I read the demand with curiosity and a bit of worry. The message stated in rather vague language that the sender had been asked by “the indigenous community” to help stamp out all acts of appropriation of their cultural and religious forms by white people. And the best way to do this, according to him, was to put mass social pressure on a particular white woman who was about to host a workshop.

My reply was ambiguous and non-committal. “Thanks. I’ll look into this,” I wrote back, and then did exactly that.

The message bothered me a bit, especially due to the strange claims by the author. There is no such thing as “the indigenous community,” for instance, but rather countless indigenous communities. Nor did I know of any such communities investing specific white people to be the defender of their sacred cultural practices.
What bothered me most, however, was that the woman to be denounced was not actually claiming to make or to teach people an indigenous rite or practice. I asked the activist about this, and his hostile reply gave me my first taste of what the arguments around cultural appropriation would soon become.

“White people should stick to their own practices instead of appropriating other people’s spirituality.”

This statement startled me, as I was in the midst of researching several Pagan groups aligned with far-right and white nationalist ideas. For these groups—whose beliefs were based around exclusion, genetic ancestry, and separatism—white people should only worship “European” gods, and such gods shouldn’t be worshiped by others. That is, gods like Thor or Lugh were only for “white” people and for no one else.

In the end, I declined to help denounce the woman, and instead watched in shock at the streams of abusive comments hurled at her by quite a few people who’d answered this call instead. Remarkably few of those people self-identified as indigenous—many of them were also “white”—but no one else seemed to notice this. They succeeded: the workshop was canceled, and a victory was declared over cultural appropriation.

That event particularly haunts me, especially since I have seen it repeated in countless other iterations: social media crusades, pressure campaigns, and boycotts against individuals deemed “appropriative” of indigenous, or African, or Asian, or any other spiritual or cultural forms. In some cases these crusades are understandable; for instance against shops selling Native American ceremonial head dresses, or individuals claiming to teach Haitian Voodoo with no relationship to Haitian practitioners, or “Enlightenment Centers” dispensing ayahuasca or other entheogenic substances to urban professionals looking for ways to become more in touch with themselves.

In many more instances, however, the targets haven’t been people trying to make money off of religious or cultural forms. Instead, they were people adopting forms and practices that “belong to others.” Such forms and practices include, among many others: wearing certain hair styles, make-up, or jewelry (dreadlocks, henna, mohawks, hoop earrings, bangles, winged eyeliner); eating certain foods (collard greens, fry bread) or even entire cuisines (such as Mexican, Chinese, or Indian); using certain words or manners of speech (including words “belonging” to gay or Black people); and especially spiritual practices (including Tarot, Yoga, and entire religious traditions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, and Kabbala). And
while in many cases the target is someone identified as a white person, there are also many examples in which Black people are accused of appropriating indigenous cultural forms, or people of Asian descent accused of stealing or appropriating from Black communities. These many debates, accusations, and excesses around cultural appropriation can all get quite messy, understandably leading many to completely abandon even trying to avoid it. On the other side, there are some who deny these obvious excesses occur, or entrench in grand political narratives which paint groups of people (often but not always white people) as “inherently appropriative.”

For those who truly wish not to do harm, to not oppress or steal from others, and also for those who truly wish to support and protect the recovery, growth, and continuation of the ancestral and cultural forms of oppressed peoples, cultural appropriation is a deeply important concept. Causing unnecessary harm and offense to people, especially to those who have suffered political subjugation by Empire, is something many people understandably wish to avoid. Unfortunately, the concept of cultural appropriation and the current arguments against it have drifted into a strange and unnavigable space wherein any adoption of another culture’s forms, style of dress, language, and food can be seen as appropriative, harmful, and oppressive.

This current understanding presents several problems and can lead to something even more dangerous than the harm it attempts to present. First of all, the concept is no longer rooted (if it ever previously was) in a historical understanding of how cultures are formed, how they change, and how they are delineated. This leads to the second problem, which is that arguments about who should and who should not be allowed to wear, eat, believe, worship, or practice things enforce notions of cultural, racial, and ethnic separatism that mirror nationalist and monotheist fears about miscegenation, cultural mixing, and foreign pollution. Third, despite attempting to fight imperialist colonial forms of oppression, the concept now reproduces a uniquely Western capitalist framework in which even sacred cultural forms—just like air, water, and other parts of the world previously exempt from economic logic—are subject to the logic of Neoliberal privatization and commodification.

The Drifted Meaning of Cultural Appropriation

How a concept meant to protect indigenous cultural forms from exploitation became instead an argument for racial separatism and a reproduction of capitalist property relations is unclear. Often times in discussions⁴ the concept is presented and debated without reference to its theoretical framework, which can cause drift in the meaning of a concept,

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¹ Especially via social media like Tumblr, and Twitter, where anonymity is easy and claimed authority is impossible to verify.
especially when there is no agreement nor mediator on what the concept actually means. For instance, consider how concepts like “toxic masculinity” or “BIPOC” often have two completely different meanings operating in the same arguments. Toxic masculinity, for instance, can mean “masculinity that is toxic” to some while also meaning “masculinity is toxic” to others. BIPOC has two meanings now: “people of color who are Black or Indigenous” (excluding other people of color, for instance Chinese or other Asian immigrants) and also “Black, Indigenous, and other people of color” (including all people of color, with a special emphasis on Black and Indigenous people). In both instances, the difference in understood meaning is profound.

Cultural Appropriation is subject to a similar double-meaning, except in its case the meaning is triple. First of all, the term itself came into use to refer to something completely different than either of the two meanings of the phrase now. As Shuja Haidar explains:

“...the Left has not always understood “cultural appropriation” as a form of oppression. This connotation of the term has become ubiquitous in today’s social media-driven political climate. But when it first came into use, “cultural appropriation” denoted very nearly the opposite of its contemporary meaning.

The idea preceded the term, as a product of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. For thinkers like Stuart Hall, cultural appropriation described the way subcultures were created. The contemporary objects of inquiry, in studies like 1975’s Resistance Through Rituals, were youth cultures in England: teddy boys, mods, skinheads and so on.

But the precedents ran deeper. Indian food in England, Negro spirituals in America, bathhouses in 19th-century France — these were all contexts in which members of what we might now call “marginalized groups” used elements of a dominant culture in altered forms, generating their own communities that could hide in plain sight.

That is, Cultural Appropriation originally referred to acts by marginalized people to retool dominant cultural forms as their own. As Haidar mentions, the Negro spiritual is a great example of this. In perhaps the most famous spiritual, “Go Down Moses,” slaves from Africa appropriated the Jewish story of their escape from slavery in Egypt, and were thus able to sing openly about their desire for freedom by using the sacred texts of their masters.

So that is the first meaning of Cultural Appropriation, one that has at least a neutral (if not liberatory) connotation. Of course that is not what most people mean by the term now. It now refers to the adoption or theft of marginalized cultural forms by dominant cultures, rather than the adaptation of dominant cultural forms by people in marginalized cultures: literally the opposite of its original meaning.
**The Proper and Appropriate Meaning of “Appropriation”**

There is a third meaning, however, which is more a literal understanding of the term rather than either of its connotations. But before we look at that one, we need to take an important detour into etymology (the study of the root meanings of words) to see something larger here.

While we generally think of appropriation as a kind of theft, appropriation literally means something else: to set aside or claim as belonging to something or someone. Its two primary meanings are “to turn into property” and “to set aside” (consider the phrase “budget appropriations,” which are funds set aside for a purpose).

These meanings come from its shared Latinate root (via French) with the following words:

- proper/improper
- proprietary
- propriety
- appropriate/inappropriate (adj.)
- expropriate
- property

The root word entered English through French as a conflation of two closely related words: propreté (from Latin proprietas, “special character or quality”) and propre (from Latin proprius, “specific to itself, one’s own”). The English meanings of all the related words thus bear the meanings of that combined root, which are:

- intrinsic, innate, or natural quality (as in “healing properties”)
- individual, unique (“proper noun,” a noun that refers to a unique thing or person
- apt, fitting (“proper or appropriate attire”)
- belonging to or of oneself (“proprietary” and “property,” also in the French reflexive use of propre: “its own”)
- correct (“proper speech”)
- clean, set right (“everything in its proper place,” seen especially in French propre: clean)
- distinct, set apart, limited (“the city proper”)

Particularly important in all these meanings is that property as we understand it now (something owned or ownable) is a much later meaning of the word that only came into common use during
the birth of capitalism in the 17th century. The earlier sense of property as something inherent or intrinsic to a thing morphed into this dominant meaning through the idea that external things (like land) could be seen as a unique, set apart, and intrinsic quality (as in “healing properties”) of an individual or group.

Appropriation preserves all these root meanings. To appropriate is to:

- turn something into one’s own
- to turn into something that can be or is part of one’s self (property)
- to limit a thing as reserved for an individual or a group
- and to set a thing apart from other things.

In all these meanings it parallels the English legal concept of “Enclosure,” the parceling of common land into separate plots for sale and ownership.

So, Cultural Appropriation literally denotes a kind of parceling out or dividing of culture for ownership, taking its qualities and nature for one’s own in exclusion of others. Of course, that’s not how it’s actually used now. Instead, Cultural Appropriation generally means, as recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary,

the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.

Note the re-appearance in that definition of appropriate as the adjectival “inappropriate,” which brings us one other core meaning of proper/property/propriety/appropriate: that of “rightness” or “correctness.” This is again inherited from the French word propre, whose non-reflexive meaning is “clean” (les vaisselles sont propres/the dishes are clean). Another way of translating this meaning is “back to their nature” (that is, undirtied, uncontaminated—basically: “pure”).

So, Cultural Appropriation is inappropriate because it puts cultural forms where they should not be. It is not proper (clean, true, correct) to adopt someone else’s culture, because those things should be kept separate (just as property is separate, unique, set apart, exclusive).
THE ENCLOSED CULTURAL COMMONS

So we find really two contradictory logics within the concept of Cultural Appropriation. The first is its literal definition: *the turning of culture into property or adopting cultural forms as one’s own, or the enclosing of cultural forms for private rather than public use.* However, the common understanding of the concept means the opposite: *the theft of cultural property owned by or inherit/intrinsic to specific peoples or groups.*

Let’s look now at the way arguments about cultural appropriation often occur, especially in the United States. Though the political theories employed in these arguments vary, they are all based upon a belief in cultural “property,” that there are practices, clothing and hair styles, foods, and beliefs that can be—and are—owned or intrinsic to one people and should not be used or adopted by others. That is, cultural forms are private property, and only the owners of those cultural forms may participate in, practice, or use them.

Who precisely has the authority to make decisions about the use of that property is not always clear, since cultural forms (unlike books or songs, for example) cannot easily be traced to an author or authority, only a cultural, racial, or identity group. And of course, no group is monolithic, so the determination on whether of a cultural form is being appropriated is usually up to people who appoint themselves representatives of that group.

This can be seen best in a recent essay written by an anonymous group of North American people of claimed Romani descent, titled: “Your Tarot Card Practice is Romani Cultural Appropriation.” The essay offers no evidence that Tarot cards are a spiritual practice that originated with the Romani; in fact, it is quite defensive of anyone who might ask for such evidence:

“it’s tiresome that we once again need to cater to white people by providing ‘sources’ that they are either just going to ignore or use to appropriate us anyway”

The essay then admits that there is no agreement among the Romani that non-Romani shouldn’t be allowed to read Tarot:

“Tarot is CLOSED. Yes, there are Romani people who say it’s not. But don’t you want to err on the side of caution and just be conservative about your practices?... So please get it through
your heads, people, many of us ARE NOT OKAY with you using Tarot cards. I don’t care if you are white or not. I don’t care who you are. I don’t care what mental or physical health conditions you have. You’re not welcome to my practice. Not in a spell or in a private reflective practice....”

This same problem of authority occurs in many other arguments about cultural appropriation as well. For instance, who has the authority to say that Yoga should only be practiced by Asians? Who owns dreadlocks—Black Americans or the other peoples who have also worn dreaded hair, including the Ngapa of India, the Cree, Aztec priests, the Poles, the Ancient Greeks and Minoans, and the Massai?

The matter of dreadlocks in particular underlines another problem in many of the conversations about cultural appropriation, because often times an apparent claim to exclusivity or ownership is historically inaccurate. For instance, two ritual forms seen as cultural property to indigenous people in North America—sacred drum making and sweating ceremonies, are actually much more widespread. Likewise, a long list of words “exclusive” to AAVE (African American Vernacular English) that was used to police cultural appropriation in many online forums contains quite a few words developed earlier among other English-speaking peoples (including ain’t, y’all, and even the word “cunty,” claimed as exclusive property of AAVE but used much earlier in English Cockney and also Australian slang).

We could get quite lost in a long list of such problems, easily and endlessly poking holes in the arguments about appropriation, but the core questions are more important. Is culture “property?” Can culture be “owned?”

That leads us back to the literal definition of Cultural Appropriation: the turning of culture and cultural forms into property, enclosing or parceling out culture into things that can be owned, bought, and held privately rather than commonly. In this understanding of the concept, we can see immediately that the property logic of capitalism (remembering that the word property itself took on an economic sense only after the birth of capitalism) is the primary conceptual framework in the common (non-literal or “social justice”) definition of Cultural Appropriation.

Consider again the above cited essay, which essentially claims that the Romani “own” Tarot. The authors argue that, because they believe the Romani are the authors or creators of Tarot, that Tarot is inherently Romani and has an intrinsic Romani property, they therefore have the right to assert an intellectual property right over its use. It is improper for Tarot to be used by others because such use takes it out of its proper place. And people who use it without their permission are therefore violating Romani ownership rights, a point that can be seen particularly in the essay’s

2 If you have been practicing Tarot and now realize you have been stealing, the writers of the essay also have a suggestion for what to do with your cards:“Make confetti - no really, it removes them from circulation and makes a giant mess that you, or someone you love, will have to clean up later, and that may be penance enough for those who really want to punish themselves.”
repeated statements that, if someone wants a Tarot divination, they must pay a Romani person to perform it for them.

Asserting ownership and attempting to privatize something that has become common parallels the capitalist logic of property, especially during the birth of capitalism. The repeated use of the word “closed” in their essay about Tarot echoes the capitalist logic of Enclosure, the privatization of something that had been commonly used. We should here remember especially that feudal lords and then the crown held “legal” ownership of the land upon which the commons existed. By enclosing it, the government was in essence re-asserting the right to exclude people from something they had come to see as non-exclusive.

While it may seem a bit harsh to compare social justice arguments for cultural exclusion to capitalist enclosure and private property, this cannot be ignored. Much of the discourse—especially from American activists—has inherited (or has been colonized by) the capitalist logic of property. In their framework (unacknowledged or not), cultural forms are property belonging to a specific group of people, and using those forms without express permission is theft or trespassing.

**THE PROFANED SACRED**

However, though the social justice understanding of the problem of cultural appropriation and a more literal understanding seem to be completely opposed to each other (one asserts property rights on culture, the other insists culture cannot be property), they both agree in one area. Both stand as critiques of the commercialization of cultural forms by capitalist corporations and the seizure of sacred artifacts by museums and other institutions. It’s in this shared criticism that a kind of re-orientation might occur.

Consider, for example, the British Museum, which is the largest depository of stolen sacred artifacts in the world. Not just the Elgin Marbles (Greek polytheist), but also the Maqdala treasures (including Ethiopian artifacts of early Christians and a sacred lock of hair from an emperor), a statue from Easter Island, the Benin Bronzes (sacred sculptures from Benin), and countless other...
sacred relics (including bones and other body parts) from indigenous cultures across every continent are all held as property by the British Museum.

Likewise, corporations and entrepreneurs constantly commercialize and market spirituality and cultural forms. The American clothing corporation Urban Outfitters, for example, has repeatedly sold merchandise using Navajo and other North American indigenous people’s traditional artwork; perfume and make-up corporation Sephora recently sold a commercial “witch kit,” and indigenous and traditional dances, clothing, and many other cultural forms are constantly used as marketing for products ranging from soda to automobiles to banking services.

And of course there are the “plastic shamans,” the spiritual retreats, conventions, workshops, and media created and led by people who have repackaged sacred traditions into commercial ventures for the professional managerial classes of every city in the world. It’s impossible to ignore these things: the ayahuasca retreats, sweat lodge ceremonies, and shamanic journeying quests to help project managers and corporate executives find new inspiration for their teams and companies, charlatans teaching indigenous practices they conjured from their imaginations, and of course the lucrative “spiritual tourism” industry promising to offer connection to authentic and exotic wisdom.

This is all cultural appropriation in its “truest” form, and regardless of which understanding one has on what appropriation actually means, the reaction to these things is usually visceral disgust and anger.

That shared experience points to something deeper going on than mere “inappropriate” adoption of culture. It isn’t just that these are acts which steal or enclose spiritual or cultural forms: a sacred violation seems to be occurring. Or as Marx and Engles wrote in The Communist Manifesto, referring to the transformative power of the capitalist class, these commercial acts turn the sacred into the profane.

The roots of both the words sacred and profane are also Latin and likewise come to us through French. Sacred means something “set apart,” something that is holy, put to a dedicated (usually but not always religious) use. Profane, on the other hand, means “outside the temple.” To profane something was to displace it, to strip it of its sacred nature, to make it mundane, normal, everyday, or banal.

To put it another way, a sacred thing has meaning outside of the everyday, and a profane thing no longer has that meaning and has instead become everyday.

Returning to the contradictory meanings of cultural appropriation, it’s obvious that both agree sacred things should not be commercialized, that commercialization, marketing, and the capitalist logic ultimately profanes (cheapens and banalizes) the sacred. The difference between them can then be restated as a difference in the conception of the sacred itself.
THE LEFT AND RIGHT SACRED

We’ve been slowly pulling at the tangled threads of the matter of Cultural Appropriation, and we need to do a little more tugging in order to get to the core problem. To this, we need to make one more apparent diversion, which is not a diversion at all but rather the primary of the knot: the sacred itself.

In many Arabic cultures (which inherited this division from their pre-Islamic animist ancestors), as well as many other cultures, there is a division between the left and right hands according to what they can be used for. One hand (the right hand) is considered clean and therefore can be used for tasks like eating or cooking, and that hand can also be offered to another person (for touch, as in a handshake or to help stabilize someone who is falling). The other hand, the left hand, is considered unclean, not to be offered to others and not to be used for eating. However, the left hand does have its own uses: for instance, it is used in urination or defecation, as well as for cleaning the body afterwards, and also for touching dead bodies or other “impure” things.

It would seem at first glance that the right hand—the clean hand—is a sacred hand, since it is set apart (one of the meanings of sacred) from the dirtying tasks associated with toilet activities. And this is true, but it does not tell the whole story. The left hand, also, has a sacred nature, specifically because it is set apart for touching unclean things and ultimately making sure that the right hand is able maintain its sacred “pure” role.

This division between a left and a right sacred is not limited to hands, nor to Arabic cultures. In fact, similar divisions exist in almost every known culture (including “secular” ones), a kind of “binary” sacred in which the sacred itself is divided between two orientations.³

Consider for example the purity codes found in the Torah regarding menses, semen, and genital discharge:

When a man has an emission of semen, he must bathe his whole body with water, and he will be unclean till evening. Any clothing or leather that has semen on it must be washed with water, and it will be unclean till evening. When a man lies with a woman and there is an emission of semen, both must bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening.

When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening. Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean. Whoever touches her bed must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening. Whoever touches anything she sits on must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening. Whether it is the bed or anything she was sitting on, when anyone touches it, he will be unclean till evening.

³ I was first introduced to this conception by Finnchuill’s essay in A Beautiful Resistance 3: Left Sacred, which inspired the title of that publication. A pdf of the essay is now made available for free at this link.
If a man lies with her and her monthly flow touches him, he will be unclean for seven days; any bed he lies on will be unclean.” Leviticus 15: 16-24

While many modern interpretations of these codes (and other prohibitions, for instance those against wearing mixed-fabric clothing or eating certain foods) interpret them as a kind of hygiene, this reading ignores the repeated references to sin, abomination, and the need for atonement required, especially for women:

When she is cleansed from her discharge, she must count off seven days, and after that she will be ceremonially clean. On the eighth day she must take two doves or two young pigeons and bring them to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. The priest is to sacrifice one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. In this way he will make atonement for her before the LORD for the uncleanness of her discharge.

You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.

Leviticus 15: 28-31

The “impure” quality of semen and menses in ancient Jewish law—as well as other cultures—probably comes from older animist beliefs about ancestors and spirits entering the body through those fluids, especially since they are both associated ultimately with new life. Rituals and ceremonies were required to deal with these substances because they held the very power of life within them (and were sometimes even seen as places where there was no boundary between this-world and the Otherworld or the divine). So though they were later re-labeled as “impure” and defiling by priests enforcing monotheism onto previously animist Hebrews, the purity rituals and sacrifices continue the belief that semen and menses were sacred.  

In addition, the directives on what to do with any objects that touched these sacred substances tell us more about their otherworldly nature. Clay pots that came in contact with them were to be broken so they could never be used, wooden tools needed to be thoroughly cleaned, and everything else that touched these substances (including other people) also needed to undergo cleansing rituals. This all points to an attempt to keep the “impure” sacred from spreading into mundane, everyday life, just as many African animist peoples performed long rituals to make sure the gods and spirits stayed in the otherworld, rather than invading the mundane world.  

The left sacred is a transgressive sacred, a sacred that seeks to spread and contaminate the rest of life with its power. The other hand of the sacred, seen in the purity codes of Leviticus, is the right sacred.

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4 See The Red Goddess by Peter Grey for more on this.

5 For great discussions about animist cultures and their taboos about menses, semen, other bodily fluids and the dead, and for countless examples of the animist practice of keeping the divine from “spilling out” into the mundane, see On Kings, by Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber (free download available here).
sacred, the sacred that polices the borders between the sacred and the profane with an aim to stop the sacred from spreading to places where it cannot be controlled any longer.

The concerns of the right sacred are order, separation, and purity, with a particular focus on preventing syncretic practice and intermixing. We can see this concern immediately in the Judaic prohibitions against eating foods containing both milk and meat in the same dish or wearing clothing containing threads from different sources. Much more obvious—and often violent—in these texts are the divine decrees about preventing intermarriage or allowing those animist and polytheist beliefs (and the people who hold them) to survive:

> let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you, lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.

> “...utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place”

Judaic law is hardly the only place such things have occurred, but it is particularly instructive for two primary reasons. First, these laws were recorded during times of political identity formation, a process of struggle between a monotheistic and authoritarian priest class and a peasant population that resisted this formation. That peasant population constantly “angered” the one-god by intermixing with neighboring peoples, adopting “foreign” customs and gods, and constantly returning to their ancestral, animist ways. Thus more and more codes of behavior were developed, with ever-increasing commands and prohibitions through which the priest class could better define Jewish religious/political identity through hard boundaries between the peasants and their neighbors. These laws show clearly how the right sacred not only tries to

6 Deuteronomy 20:16-18 King James Version and Deuteronomy 12: 2-4, King James Version

7 I’m deeply indebted to Peter Grey and his book *Lucifer Princeps* for this realization.
keep the sacred in its place and to prevent it from escaping into the everyday life, but also to limit
the sacred of others, to prevent a foreign sacred from polluting the domestic sacred.

The second reason why these laws are particularly important is because they function as the
“ancestral” theological basis of Christianity. Regardless of whether or nor Christianity is actually a
continuation of Jewish sacred traditions, because it propagated these texts as part of its own canon
of sacred writings (they comprise 77% of the Christian Bible), they became the basis for a global
conception of what the sacred is. Not just in the fact that almost a third of the world is Christian,
but also that modern Western institutions and cultural forms (including Capitalism) were formed
from this conceptual inheritance. Our conceptions of the nation-state, race, identity, colonialism,
Democracy, the Enlightenment, and property all stem from the Christian worldview and its Judeo-
Christian

One wonders what our societies might have looked like had other indigenous frameworks of the
sacred formed the foundation of our public and private life, institutions, and communal relations
rather than a monotheistic, right sacred. We can get a glimpse of that possibility easily by noticing
what all was born from monotheism and the countless people who still suffer from it. The
transatlantic slave trade, for example, the colonization of the Americas, the birth of Capitalism, the
classification of people into race, and especially the great calamity of industrial civilization and
climate change were only possible in a framework of a purifying, exclusionary, right sacred, absent
its transgressive, syncretic, and boundary-defying left sacred.

Purified to Death

The right sacred commands the destruction of foreign shrines, foreign gods, and foreign
practices in order to keep a people pure and distinct. The left sacred goes from shrine to
shrine, adding gods and practices rather than deleting them. The right sacred fears the
dead, death, disease, and all that issues from the body. The left sacred cleans the bodies of the dead
(and even lives among them, as the Aghori in India) and cares for the bodies of the diseased, does
magic with menstrual blood under the full moon and swallows semen as part of religious rites (the
Boborites for example, a Christian gnostic sect.)

8 This term has recently become considered problematic by some. I use it in the older sense (via Nietzsche)
as an inherited framework where Christianity saw itself as a “progression” or “fulfillment” of Jewish sacred
forms and thus propagated them; rather than the American Christian belief that Christians are “really” the
true inheritors of Judaism.

9 The pre-monotheist peoples in Europe and Africa were both known to constantly mix traditions, to
welcome foreign gods, “try them out,” add them alongside their own. See True to the Earth, by Kadmus,
especially his discussions about the constant multiplicity, pluralism, and additive nature of indigenous
African and European belief systems.
The right sacred needs the gods to stay in their “proper” place. The left sacred urges them to spill out into the everyday, through the spontaneous ecstatic and possessory rituals seen in Greek, Roman, and countless African and Asian cultures (see for example the Neak Ta, ancestral land spirits displaced by Cambodian textile factories who possessed female workers while on the job).

Most of all, the right sacred needs things kept separate, parceled out, divided. Its goal is to make sure the everyday is never polluted by the divine world. The right sacred is the secularizing sacred, dividing the world between the transcendent Other (the gods, ancestors, spirits, the dead, and also the animals, plants, and all of material reality, which in animism is also Other) and the mundane, controllable world of humans.

To be clear, the right sacred has a necessary role. As in the words of T.S. Eliot, “mankind cannot bear very much reality.” It is the role of the right sacred to appease, to propitiate, to give offerings to the Other in order to ensure the survival of a people. It is the right sacred that creates and then beheads the sacred king who contains within him the will of the gods and the entire divine order.  

Without the right sacred, there is only divine forces, and humans are powerless in their midst. But without the left sacred, there is only division, constant propitiation, constant need for apologies for ever increasing offenses (as in modern social justice discourse). Without the left sacred there are only walls and fences, everything property, everything in its proper place. The messy and terrifying chaos of the forest is cut back and mown over, the unpredictable rivers once worshiped as gods are straightened and damned. The needs of humans become the only priority, without thought to what once-divine nature might think about its exploitation. Animals and plants, once seen as sacred Other beings and ancestors, now become mere industrial products wrapped in that ultimate right sacred invention to keep things pure: plastic.

This is ultimately how our understanding of culture and appropriation has gone so wrong, and especially why it increasingly mirrors right-wing and racial separatist views about purity and pollution. The right sacred, having so strongly enforced the boundaries between the mundane and the divine Other, now has only the symbolic representations of what is sacred (or more properly a simulacra of the sacred, a copy whose original has been destroyed or otherwise no longer exists) to propitiate. It is thus trapped in the world of empty forms which it itself created, legalistic codes it no longer remembers why it created. The gods and spirits have become mere metaphors, the sacred reduced to “cultural expression.” Yet still the right sacred attempts to perform its role, drawing boundaries and policing the borders of symbols, speech, dress, and every other possible transgression.

10 See again On Kings by Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber. Also of note, the members of a mystical group created by Georges Bataille and others to explore the left sacred each vowed to be the Acephale, the headless one, assuming one of them would agree to cut off another’s head. No one would, showing what ultimately happens without the right sacred.
This is why a white person adopting the cultural forms of others is seen as so offensive to both white nationalists and social justice activists. Both groups use only the logic of the right sacred, the fear of the sacred Other polluting or being polluted when it is out of its proper place. The right sacred can only see such transgression as a negative thing, a “sin” for which someone must atone lest some great harm befall society.

But this is also why the commodification of the sacred has occurred and the deep spiritual hunger that leads to mass markets for “cultural products” exists. The consumer of spiritual products is buying industrially-produced symbols of the sacred, searching for an experience of the transgressive left sacred by the only means available to them—the capitalist market. But in that market, the divine and terrifying Other is reduced to mere profane commodity. This is not the sacred escaping its policed boundaries: in capitalist production, nothing is sacred, everything is profaned.

**THE CHAOTIC RETURN OF THE LEFT SACRED**

So, how can we reorient these discussions about cultural appropriation and root it in this understanding of the missing left sacred? Because there is absolutely a justifiable concern from indigenous peoples for the survival of their cultures in the face of domination and extermination.

Before continuing, I’ll engage in some personal disclosure. With the exception of Tarot (which is not my primary method of divination, as I use one I created myself) and my passion for cooking “non-European” food, none of my spiritual practices, nor mode of dress or speech, nor any of the gods and spirits I revere and communicate with can be said to be “appropriative.” I don’t use white sage, I do not wear dreadlocks or bangles or say “lit” or “bae,” nor do I use any spiritual forms from
any culture other than those of my ancestors. That’s not by intended choice nor moral decision: it just happened that way.

Also, though I was born in the United States I no longer live in North America, which in the minds of some means I have no right to speak about the situation there while in the eyes of others I am still a “white American settler” who still somehow benefits from a national situation I specifically chose to flee and intend never to return to.

I disclose all of this to head off several common accusations about anyone arguing for a more nuanced understanding of culture and transgression: “you’re just a white person who thinks they can do whatever they want” and “you’re just a settler-colonist trying to justify your theft.” None of my own practices need defending, and I am not engaged in stealing from or oppressing indigenous people.

My concern, instead, is twofold. First, as I mentioned, the current arguments about cultural appropriation lead to an increasing framework of racial separatism. “White people should not do non-white things,” whether said by a white nationalist or a social justice activist, ultimately leads to the same terrifying end, which is ultra-nationalism and fascism.

Secondly, and much more primary, my concern is for the sacred itself. Most arguments about cultural appropriation, especially in the United States, generally skirt around the idea of the sacred. Oftentimes it’s quite clear many of the participants on all sides don’t actually believe in gods, magic, or spirits, nor do they approach these matters from anything recognizable as an animist framework. That is, the arguments are rarely about what the sacred itself might want or desire or what might give offense to it, but rather what is offensive to other humans or to nebulous people groups.

If one doesn’t believe the sacred exists, or if one’s conception of the sacred is something relative to an individual or people group rather than something that is in-itself sacred, then the conversations will always be founded instead upon secular political situations and frameworks. If on the other hand a person believes the sacred “really” exists, not just as metaphor or cultural forms, then the conversation will include a line of reasoning that those secular political situations cannot accommodate.

To put it in a much simpler way, consider the sacred oak tree outside my window as I write this. Is the tree sacred because humans made it sacred, or was this tree sacred and I merely recognize its sacred nature? The first view is human-centric and assumes that humans are the arbiters of what is sacred and what is mundane. The second view, which is the animist view, recognizes that there is a divine Other which exists outside, without, and despite us. In this view, the tree is sacred in-itself,
not because “all trees are sacred” but because the divine Other intersects through this particular
tree’s existence and the tree itself is divinely Other."

In the secular, non-animist view, appropriated cultural forms do harm to people and ultimately
derange those forms. In the animist view, the appropriation of cultural forms are a sign of the
sacred “transgressing” the boundaries humans made for it, attempting to spread and expand just
like forests tend to do. This latter view, the left sacred view, does not necessarily mean that theft
should be encouraged. Instead, it concludes that this is part of the nature of the sacred itself, a
buried or chthonic shadow aspect.

The divine Other wants always to infect the world, to overwhelm the channels and burst past the
dams we build for it. Thus, it is not only not surprising but also quite humorous that gods
worshiped in India are inked into the arms of London and Los Angeles hipsters, that sacred
entheogenic practices colonial administrators attempted to eradicate are now being practiced in
the very nations from which those administrators came. Likewise, it is both unsurprising and also
humorous that the gods and ancestors of colonized and oppressed peoples of Africa and the
Americas were hidden in plain sight through their syncretic association with Catholic saints (the
original meaning of “cultural appropriation”), just as the pagan gods of European peoples like
Brigid, Ana, and Hermes survive in Catholic saints Brigitte, Anne, and Expedite.

Shift the view slightly and we can also find ourselves laughing at the terror of a white Southern
Baptist preacher seeing his grandchildren wearing the hairstyles and using the language of the
Black people he fought to segregate out from “proper” society, just as medieval Catholic bishops
complained relentlessly of the faithful dancing the old dances, visiting the old fountains, and even
engaging in secret rites with menstrual blood under the full moon.

We must remember here: in the animist view, the sacred cannot be destroyed, because it is wholly-
Other. The sacred is a terrible, terrifying, powerful force. Attempts to destroy it, or to suppress it,
only make it angry, make it more insistent about transgressing into the mundane.

That, I think, is what is happening now. It is a messy and unclean process, especially politically. The
social justice framework cannot accommodate for this sacred resurgence, especially because the
sacred cares nothing for modern myths about racial and national identity. There is little we can do
about it, as policing the borders of culture only further entrenches the right sacred at the expense
of its left.

It has been said that “Rome conquered Greece, but Greece also conquered Rome.” The meaning of
this phrase is that Rome’s occupation and displacement of Greek political power not only did not
eradicate Greek culture and belief, but instead caused it to be transformed, “polluted” in the left

11 Note here that both frameworks at least would agree in one area: the tree should not be cut down because
it is sacred.
sacred sense, by Greek gods, Greek magical systems, Greek philosophy, and thus ultimately by Greek-ness itself. Roman temples were copies of Greek temples, most Roman religious forms and even gods were transparent copies of the Greek forms and gods they “conquered.”

Perhaps we are seeing this again. Empire (capitalist, secular/christian, “western” and especially American Empire) conquered the world and is still fighting constantly to eradicate the sacred from the earth. But the sacred cannot be eradicated, only enclosed for a little while and temporarily appeased. The colonialist order is being colonized by those Empire tried to subjugate, along with their beliefs, their gods, their cultural and ancestral traditions. And most of all, the Sacred itself are poised to destroy all our fragile notions of purity and separation, of what is proper and what is property, until the left sacred finally can take its true place alongside the right.

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