



## Cultural appropriation: What it means and why it matters

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### **Joanna Wane on navigating the social minefield of cultural "ownership".**

The theme of the Queenstown party was "Inappropriate", and the woman who contacted costume hire company First Scene had already come up with a few ideas of her own.

Maybe, she suggested, her husband could go as the Christchurch mosque shooter and she could be a Muslim? Or what about American slave and master costumes?

Owner Jo Pilkington has had a few clients she's politely declined to work with (and yes, this was one of them) but not all have set out to deliberately cause offence. When an English fashion designer wanted some korowai for a photoshoot, Pilkington gave her a call to ask what she had in mind.

"They were going to have [the cloaks] lying on the ground, with the models sitting on them," she says. "So I sent them some links to information on what korowai is about and said I couldn't hire them in that situation."

You won't find any Ku Klux Klan outfits among the 400,000-plus costumes and props in First Scene's Auckland showroom. Apart from a few piupiu and other kapa haka basics,

you won't find many Māori or Pasifika items on public display, either. Most are "request only". Staff are trained in cultural styling and encouraged to talk with customers about what they're hiring and how it will be used.

"If someone says they want to look Asian, I don't know what that means in their head," says Pilkington. "Is a Japanese kimono okay if that's not your country of origin? It depends on how you wear it.

"When you're going to a party, there's often an element of wanting to shock. People still come in for costumes that are quite sensitive. But we try to steer them in the right direction to not make fools of themselves or do something inappropriate when they don't intentionally mean to."

Fashion designer Dame Trelise Cooper pleaded ignorance in December when her Trail of Tiers dress was described as "colonial violence in floral polyester" by Victoria University sociologist and professor of Māori education Joanna Kidman.

Calling it an "embarrassing mistake", Cooper apologised and withdrew the dress from sale. At the time, she told the Herald she was unaware of the phrase "Trail of Tears", which refers to the forced relocation of Native Americans from their ancestral lands in the mid-19th century. The 8000km trail crossed nine states and thousands died on the way.

Critics were unsympathetic though because Cooper had form, after sending models down the runway in First Nation headdresses at her 2014 New Zealand Fashion Week show.

Public shaming of celebrities accused of plundering from other cultures, as an exotic fashion statement or to boost their brand, has become a form of social activism, especially among indigenous people and Black or South Asian communities, who liken it to being colonised all over again.

Kim Kardashian, a serial culture vulture, sent the hashtag #KimOhNo trending after naming her shapewear line Kimono. Last year she was called out on Twitter for posting photos of herself wearing maang tikka, traditional Indian head jewellery. "My culture isn't your 'aesthetic' or 'style', so please show some respect," read one of a flurry of tweets. "Cultural appropriation is not okay."

**F**rom The Hunger Games actor Amandla Stenberg's YouTube clip Don't Cash in on My Cornrows to backlash over the use of tā moko in the new Cyberpunk 2077 video game, the Western world has been put on notice: cultural shoplifting isn't cool.

In an essay on cultural appropriation, Chinese-American writer Connie Wang says the term has become so charged that even talking about it has become "radioactive".

"The most vitriolic on the left suggest that any cultural swapping is tantamount to acts of visual racism; that using symbols without permission is always bad and those [who] do it

should be condemned without mercy," she writes. "The most sanctimonious on the right believe that cultural appropriation is a meaningless phrase that willfully ignores intent; that people should have the right to celebrate what they find beautiful without criticism or abuse."

In New Zealand, the conversation isn't new. Former All Black captain Buck Shelford reclaimed respect for the haka back in the 80s and artist Dick Frizzell's Tiki exhibition in 1992 was considered controversial even then.

Still, there's plenty of heat left in the debate. Local commentators who spoke to Canvas variously described cultural appropriation as a hornet's nest, a loaded issue, a power struggle, and a crisis of globalisation. The best advice for anyone struggling to get a handle on it all was this: "It's the act of giving a s\*\*\* – it's actually pretty simple."

Artists, musicians and writers have always been human magpies and the defence of creative expression has traditionally given them a free pass. But this isn't about cross-pollination or a fluid exchange of ideas (it's still okay to eat noodles and listen to jazz); it's about cultural exploitation, often for commercial gain, typically where there's an inherent imbalance of power.

"You can't copyright culture," wrote tikanga and reo Māori teacher Nicole Hawkins in a 2018 piece for The Spinoff, "and I think that's a damn shame." Māori, she said, don't need Pākehā artists to tell their stories for them. "What we do need are allies who can love and acknowledge our rich histories and identities without making them their own and calling it #MaoriArt."

Much of the tension lies in the challenge of staying on the right side of a line that's constantly shifting. Blackface is clearly offensive; we might have laughed at the cast of A Week of It browning up back in the 70s but it's impossible to imagine anyone being that tone deaf now. Today, watching Mickey Rooney play Japanese in Breakfast at Tiffany's is simply bizarre.

But is it okay for a straight actor to portray a gay man, or for white dancers to twerk? Ugandan choreographer Dr Alfdaniels Mivule Basibye Mabingo, a dance studies lecturer at the University of Auckland, thinks this might be the last generation of young white people to do hip-hop and feel cool.

So, should schools put Pākehā students on stage in a musical like Moana that tells a Polynesian story? When the Royal New Zealand Ballet took on an adaptation of The Piano, cultural advisor Moss Te Ururangi Patterson clashed with Czech choreographer Jiri Bubenicek for "grossly misappropriating Maori culture", while Bubenicek argued allowance should be made for artistic licence.

Controversy over who has the right to tell what stories – see the #OwnVoices movement – led to the cancellation of Jeanine Cummins' book tour for her bestselling novel, American Dirt, about a woman's flight across Mexico with her son to the US border (Cummins has

identified as white, but her grandmother is Puerto Rican). Oprah still picked it for her book club, though.

In a keynote speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival, American author Lionel Shriver claimed the restraints of cultural appropriation threaten to extinguish literature – a message she delivered while wearing a sombrero, in reference to a case where some US college students were facing disciplinary action for wearing miniature Mexican hats to a tequila party.

Shriver is notoriously "anti-PC" but British writer Bernadine Evaristo, the first Black woman to win the Booker Prize (for *Girl, Woman, Other* in 2019), has also described the idea of cultural appropriation as "total nonsense", saying authors should not have to "stay in their lane".

Auckland author Stephanie Johnson's latest book, "Everything Changes", is due out in March. One of the key characters is a Pacific Islander. Johnson suggests it could be considered more racist for Pākehā writers NOT to represent Māori and Pasifika in New Zealand novels. But in one of her creative writing classes, a squabble broke out over a piece written by a Pākehā student where the main voice was Māori.

"They had a real go at this poor girl," she says. "Eventually, I intervened and said, 'Good on you. Try, and if you get it wrong, you'll hear about it. But be part of the discussion; that's good.'"

"A Māori friend of mine told me she's not interested in what Pākehā think about Māori. And fair enough! Us Pākehā are going to have to suck that up and most of us are prepared for that. But this squeamishness about being allowed to write about what you are not; everyone is so put in their boxes."

Johnson has written more than 20 books and as a young writer refused to do interviews, once publishing under a pseudonym, because she believes the identity of the author shouldn't matter.

"My overwhelming feeling is this sense of terrible grief that we've got to a point in our evolution where great art or literature is seen as not being able to transcend racial and gender barriers. It all comes down in the end to who made it, not the beautiful illumination this person may have cast on human nature or the elevation of the human spirit – all the things we used to want art and literature to be. I don't think novels need to be community announcements. I want more from them than that."

**M**āori academic Dr Ella Henry has been a rule-breaker since she was a young activist. That once got her into big trouble with her own elders when artist Lisa Reihana designed a poster for a play Henry had co-written (with a Pākehā woman) on Treaty relationships.

The artwork, which depicted commedia dell'arte masks adorned with moko, was considered so disrespectful that the posters were all taken down. "That was 30 years ago and I was easier to scare," she laughs. "Not so much now. And now I would have a different view. Māori art shouldn't be cloistered."

The director of Māori advancement at AUT's Business School, Henry has been researching "cultural capital" as a value associated with personal identity. She's found many examples of non-Māori engaging with her culture in a way that she believes enhances rather than diminishes it, from beautiful renditions of waiata by white and Asian private schoolgirls to the haka led by Jason Momoa at the LA premiere of Aquaman.

"It's not cultural appropriation when non-indigenous people come into our world and show respect and take the time to learn. That's cultural sharing and it's enriching for everyone. I know many Māori have a different view but I believe these things can occur - and should occur - as a consequence of the relationship you have with the Māori world."

Henry even loved popstar Rihanna getting a traditional tattoo and the Spice Girls having a go at the haka – although her more militant 25-year-old daughter might not agree. "I like that stuff because there's a possibility that Māori culture and cultural capital will survive purely and simply because it is recognised and valued outside of our time."

At the other end of the spectrum, however, is what she describes as cultural cannibalism, where people adopt someone else's culture as if they own it. "It's a brutal word from someone whose great-great-grandmother was actually a cannibal. But I think it's a succinct definition of those dreadful people who become culture vampires because they don't have capital in their own identity."

She doesn't see censorship as the answer. "Nobody has the right to tell someone else what they cannot do [culturally], beyond guilt and moral rectitude," she says. "But if you use my culture and I'm hurt by it, I have every right to tell you that. Authenticity and respect are the fabric that separates embracing culture and exploiting it. And it is a wafer-thin fabric."

Some within Māoridom do support moves towards legal protection. When French designer Jean Paul Gaultier incorporated stylised moko to promote one of his collections, Māori cultural expert Aroha Mead challenged the idea that its use should be regarded as flattery: "Tell that to Coca-Cola and Harrods, who rigorously protect their designs."

The Toi Iho trademark was registered in 2002 to signify high-quality and authentic work made by Māori and a charitable trust maintains a register of more than 100 accredited artists. And last year, Mead called for a law change after TV broadcaster Oriini Kaipara, who has a moko kauae, discovered a portrait of her face for sale online.

It's difficult for Pākehā to understand the depth of feeling that evokes without considering the historical context, says Puawai Cairns, the director of audience and insight at Te Papa, and a member of the museum's executive leadership team.

A social history specialist, she's found many examples of early settler communities borrowing from Māori culture. After the New Zealand Wars, images of "fighting chiefs" such as Tāwhiao, the second Māori King, were used on items such as gasoline containers, in the same way Native Americans were depicted with a sense of nostalgia as an indigenous culture that has now been subdued.

"When you look at those roots where our image and our culture has been kind of ransacked out of a time when we had suffered subjugation, it's natural there's a hostile attitude towards ongoing use of our image today," says Cairns. "Why take something from me when you refuse to acknowledge the truth of my existence? The pain of that is what a lot of the emotional discussions [we have now] are driven by.

"Some collaborations have been done really well, with informed consent in a much more socially conscious and empathetic way. But there are ongoing examples that rub at old wounds and continue to chafe us, so we react accordingly."

What surprised her last week wasn't the fact that talkback radio host John Banks agreed with a caller who described Māori as a "stone age culture" but the kickback from companies who pulled advertising from the station.

"That gave me great hope, that the system is now potentially monitoring and regulating itself," Cairns says. "Maybe as the hurt – those old wounds and old scars – are healed, our response to a more consensus-based cultural melange will be to see it as something exciting and fresh, rather than just another appropriation. I think that happens all the time, where cultures colliding are creating something new."

**I**n 1979, members of a Māori activist group He Taua confronted University of Auckland engineering students who were rehearsing a mock haka, traditionally performed at their graduation ceremony.

The haka, Akarana, was officially created for the university in the 1920s but had gradually deteriorated into a farce, with students dressed in hula skirts and work boots; and with penises drawn in lipstick on their bare chests.

The violent stoush that erupted left one student needing stitches and saw eight He Taua members in court charged with rioting. "Gang rampage at varsity leaves students battered," splashed a newspaper headline. "The real victims seem to have been humour, and a sense of tolerance," wrote one commentator, while Truth, a racy tabloid, declared that New Zealand now had racial warfare on its hands.

The capping parade was cancelled, Student Association president Janet Roth condemned the violence but faced a vote of no confidence for calling the "haka party" a racist caricature and the Human Rights Commission launched an inquiry into race relations in New Zealand.

For the past four years, Auckland actor and director Katie Wolfe has dug out everything she could find about a pivotal moment in our history that has been largely forgotten. Her new theatre work *The Haka Party Incident*, which opens in March, is a verbatim script compiled from her interviews with many of the key people involved.

Cultural appropriation wasn't the term used back then, but Māori had been protesting against the students' "bastardisation" of the haka for years. Wolfe offers different perspectives from those who were there on the day, without judgment, and through the lens of the time.

She first read about the incident in Ranginui Walker's book *Ka Whawhai Tonu Mātou / Struggle Without End*. "I was instantly drawn to it, this watershed moment that I believe was such a turning point in race relations in New Zealand, but has been conveniently forgotten. We're very good at the art of forgetting," she says. "It was a long journey to get those people to the table to talk. Many had never really spoken about it before and there was still a lot of angst around it."

The stigma lay over Auckland University's engineering department for years after, with many Māori refusing to study there. That's since been turned around and a new haka, written by the staff, was launched last year. Its name is *Me Hōki Whakamuri Kia Anga Whakamua*, which translates as: "In order to succeed, we must learn from the lessons of the past."

Wolfe has ancestral links with Ngāti Toa but she still had to seek permission from the iwi to use the *Ka Mate* haka, which is protected under the Treaty of Waitangi and will be one of several haka performed on stage. That's a positive evolution, she says. But as she read through submissions made to the 1979 race relations inquiry, she heard some familiar voices.

"A lot of New Zealanders [then] believed we had to be one people," she says. "The idea of partnership born out of the Treaty had completely evaporated. From a Māori point of view, they were in a lot of pain. Te reo was on the edge of being lost and there were massive problems with urbanisation. The other side was saying, 'Let's all be Kiwis.'

"Now, when you show images of the haka party performing, people's jaws drop to the ground. But this idea of reflecting Māori culture in a way we recognise as offensive was the norm back then. A lot of it was to do with freedom of expression – having the right to express myself any way I want and if it offends other people, that's their problem. And I still hear that voice very strongly today."

**A**s an immigrant from Uganda, by way of New York, Mabingo has observed the students in his Auckland University dance class struggle to navigate a safe pathway through the minefield that cultural appropriation has become.

The course used to begin with a choreography assignment to create a piece representing their technique, drawing ideas from any genre. That became so problematic he dropped the idea and now teaches them something himself to see if they're able to perform it.

He's philosophical about the need to adapt as the boundaries of what's considered acceptable change. "Why claim moral latitude for choreographers?" he says. "You have to recognise that the environment has shifted and think about how you reinvent yourself to respond."

Mabingo views cultural appropriation as an issue of power more than race – who holds the power, how they obtained it and how that power is wielded. Then capitalism is layered on top of that. He recounts the story of a Scottish woman derided for her "white saviour" complex after she published a book about spending a gap year in Zambia as a teenager.

"The whole world called her out. In Africa, I have never seen keyboard warriors so strong!" he says. "People come to Africa to brand themselves and to take our stories. The question of who is benefiting is key."

He thinks we're dealing with a world that has lost confidence in the ability of cross-cultural exchanges to heal and unite. Social media is now being used as a tool not to reach across barriers, he says, but to retreat into "tribes", connected by shared ideas and beliefs.

"We've had call-out culture and cancel culture within the space of less than five years. Now, we have boycott culture mobilising in cyberspace. It's depressing, because you want people to be open but I think that era is coming to an end.

"Globalisation is experiencing a crisis and one of the ways that is manifested is these conversations about cultural appropriation – and that's also building walls. But genuine collaborations open up genuine understanding. And from that, there are opportunities for new ideas to emerge."

**The Auckland Theatre Company's production of The Haka Party Incident runs at the ASB Waterfront Theatre from March 5 to 13 as part of the Auckland Arts Festival ([aaf.co.nz](http://aaf.co.nz)). A series of films made about it by Katie Wolfe feature in the Auckland Museum's new gallery Tāmaki Herenga Waka: Stories of Auckland.**