

A friend and I were having a discussion the other day about whether or not getting a tattoo of a saying from another language or culture is cultural appropriation. She was watching a movie when she heard a Hawaiian phrase that she loved. As she spoke I could tell that the meaning for this phrase really resonated with her. She said she would love to have it as a tattoo, but was worried about the ethical repercussions of it. What are your thoughts?

Dear M,

As I see it, your question really has two components. First, is getting a tattoo with a Hawaiian phrase cultural appropriation? Second, if it is an act of cultural appropriation, is it *wrong*?

Though you don't say, I'm going to assume that your friend is not Hawaiian, since these issues would be less puzzling if she had deep personal connections to Hawaiian culture and history. At a basic level, cultural appropriation has generally been understood to consist in the use of products that clearly reflect one culture by non-insiders to that culture. (So we can distinguish copying the words of say, some particular writer who happens to be Hawaiian, from making use of something that clearly is a product of or reflects features of the Hawaiian people or culture more broadly.) From what you say it sounds like the phrase in question is intended to be a "typical" or "widely shared" phrase in Hawaiian culture, not a statement made by one particular person who is Hawaiian. If that is right, then what your friend is doing sounds like cultural appropriation.

So is it wrong? That is more complicated. The most clear-cut cases of problematic cultural appropriation involve instances where members of a minority group profit off the culture of a minority group, without paying for the cultural products from which they profit. (For example, a company with no connections to native-Americans might make clothes using traditional Iroquois patterns, or a white dancer might become famous for doing a traditional Indlamu dance.) The challenge in these cases is that a member of a dominant group is in a position to profit because they enjoy unjustified privileges. Others will pay attention to them because of their position in the dominant group who wouldn't attend to work done by members of the non-dominant group (they wouldn't buy clothes from the Iroquois, or watch actual Zulu dancers.) In that case the dominant party is in a position to make money because of injustice, and don't give the proceeds to the artists whose work they build on, who were not themselves in a position to profit because of injustice. The gain is unfair.

Your friend's case is *not* an instance of something like that. If there is something wrong with her potential choice of tattoo, then, it would seem like it would have to rest on worries about misrepresentation, cultural essentialism, or othering. Loosely, the concern in such cases is that you are putting forward a narrow vision of the cultural in question, one that traffics in stereotypes and leads people to overlook the complexity of the underlying culture.

Here is one question that I think it might be helpful for your friend to ask herself. Is she interested in this phrase in part *because* it seems exotic? Or is it something she would endorse no matter where it came from? Is she getting it written in English? If not, would she be willing to write it out that way, or is there something about its being "from a different kind of people"

that she finds essential to her enjoyment of it? The more that is so, the more it seems like your friend's relationship to the phrase is concerning.

I would encourage your friend to spend a bit more time learning about Hawaiiin culture before she makes her choice. The more deeply involved she is in actually knowing Hawaiiin culture history and language (all of which are really interesting!) the less she has reason to worry. And of course, if she is looking to get the phrase written in Hawaiiin, I would encourage her to investigate very thoroughly. I once had a Chinese friend who casually asked somebody we came across about their tattoo. The person responded that it meant [pleasant, deep sounding, thoughtful thing.] The actual meaning of those characters in Mandarin? Terminal Illness. Whoops!

If you or your friend are interested in learning more about this, you might consider reading some of the following:

Hallie Liberto 2014, "Exploitation and the Vulnerability Clause", *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 17(4): 619–629.

James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk (eds), 2012, *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*

Erich Matthes, 2016 "Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?", *Social Theory and Practice*, 42(2): 343–366. doi:10.5840/soctheorpract201642219

Thomas Hurka 1999, "Should Whites Write About Minorities?", in his *Principles: Short Essays on Ethics*, Toronto: Harcourt Brace.