

Cornrows, Kwanzaa and Confusion: The Dilemma of Cultural Racism and
Misappropriation

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Our first task in approaching another people,
another culture is to take off our shoes,
for the place we are approaching is holy.
Else we find ourselves treading on another's dream.
More serious still, we may forget that God was there before our arrival.

The baobab is an enormous tree found in many parts of Africa. I encountered it first in Senegal, then in Djibouti. More massive than an oak, its roots spread visibly in every direction, sometimes nearly a quarter of a mile. In addition to its central place as a living expression of nature and of God, the baobab is associated with conflict and the resolution of disputes. Elders and village chiefs are frequently seen sitting under the tree with parties of a conflict. Often members of the same family, clan or tribe. Sometimes, when the parties emerge, there is a working peace. At other times, when they are unable to resolve the conflict, the result is tribal war.

A feeling of discomfort has been welling up in my soul in spite of our recent efforts (including significant anti-racism training) to move toward greater racial, ethnic and cultural diversity. I have encountered several situations in which well-intentioned Unitarian Universalists of European American heritage have sought to "lift up" the cultural roots and experiences of people of color. Many of these have been done with varying degrees of disrespect and what is, no doubt, non-conscious racism. I believe that it is time for Unitarian Universalists from different tribes to sit under the baobab.

This is part of an ongoing conversation I have had with myself, and occasionally with others, for several years. In a way, we are all feeling our way through a new minefield. I hope that expanding the conversation will help us to delve into a dimension of race relations that is sensitive, difficult, and important. This essay focuses on three aspects of culture: (a) racism and other forms of cultural bigotry, (b) developing greater sensitivity in how we honor the heritage, traditions, and work of racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups, and (c) the threat of cultural genocide and the need for cultural preservation. In these few pages we cannot capture the full scope of cultural racism, let alone analyze it. My purpose is simply to bring the issue to our attention as a religious movement, with the goal of opening up a dialogue between persons of European American heritage and those whose ancestry and heritage is in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and Pacific Islands.

Undoing the social and cultural constructs that have led to racism is, for me, a theological task. It is a transcendent experience – one step toward breaking down the barriers that divide us from each other, from all creation, and from the Great Spirit of Life that some of us call God. It is taking one step toward building a *beloved community*.

Racism is a prejudgment based on race, coupled with the power to affirm that prejudice. It is the exercise of power and the presumption of the privilege to establish and proclaim one race, history, identity, and experience as superior to all other groups. As such, racism is systemic. It saturates every part of our social system economically, politically, and culturally. Racism, including enculturated or cultural racism, imposes the power of one group to institutionalize its values and norms over all other groups. In the United States there is a limited acknowledgment of institutional racism, but cultural racism is often minimized or overlooked. Cultural racism finds its roots in the legacy of White supremacy and in placing more value in imagination than in history or facts. Toni Morrison's book, *Playing in the Dark*¹ is a literary critique of one form of cultural racism which focuses on the White imagination. One of the most widespread assumptions of White supremacy within the system of free enterprise is that the images, symbols, rituals, practices, and/or religious expressions of any culture can be freely appropriated by another, with or without permission. Cultural racism carries with it an all-pervasive set of assumptions, a deeply rooted taken-for-grantedness that affirms the bastardization (including commercialization) of a culture by placing its cultural productions on the auction block, so to speak.

Power of the Dominant Culture

The power of the White majority to decide what is valued as "normal" or acceptable, and to impart subtle and often unconscious messages about what is "right" and what is not, is especially critical when we consider children. Kenneth Clark found that, by the age of three or four, children develop opinions about their own racial groups based on socially prevailing ideas and other expressions from the dominant culture – in spite of the fact that the child may have had no direct experience with another racial, ethnic or cultural group.²

Much of the critical writing on multiculturalism in education is really about intellectual racism as a specific form of cultural racism,³ a but it has not been so named. Leonore Tiefer's article, "Intellectual Racism," is one of the few that begins to name the issue, but the challenge of cultural racism is multi-layered. Tiefer points to the necessity for European Americans to read the writings of people of color "widely and deeply" and to examine "ideas and models for their roles in perpetuating racial hierarchies."⁴ If we are to improve race relations within the Unitarian Universalist Association and in the country at large, it is also necessary to examine a multitude of values, norms and assumptions of mainstream culture just as partners in a business enterprise would examine the values, norms, and assumptions of a foreign culture in which they were seeking to do business.

Language is one of these assumptions, and it is a primary construct of racism that shapes cultural norms. I recall the exercise undertaken by Malcolm X in the early 1960s, in which he investigated the words "black" and "white" in the dictionary. Thirty years later, we still find "black" too often associated with negatives and evil and "white" with goodness and purity. Assigning terms like: "nude" to nylon stockings or "flesh" to Band-AidsTM or crayons, for example, is based on Caucasian skin tones as the norm. Several years ago, the Crayola Company introduced a set of "multicultural" crayons reflecting a wider spectrum of colors, the new palette ranging from alabaster shades to dark

chocolate. Several friends report that while they have had no problem finding these crayons in neighborhoods where people of color are the majority, they are less available in European American neighborhoods. Market research may have driven this outcome, but it suggests yet another false cultural assumption: that European Americans neither need nor want "multicultural" crayons.

Another example of cultural racism, driven by an institutional partnership, is the term "third world." Thanks to the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), commonly known as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), this term has now become a linguistic norm. More than twenty years ago, these two multilateral institutions divided the world in a way that was suited to their needs – according to their own economic formula. The "first" world was the industrialized Western capitalist countries (the United States and Western Europe); the "second" world included the Communist-bloc countries (the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe), and the "third" world represented most of the former colonies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean and Pacific Islands judged to have the potential for development with help from the West. There were even "fourth" and "fifth" world terms applied to those countries believed to have little or no potential for development due to climactic limitations or a lack of natural or human resources. This hierarchical arrangement of nations has multiple implications for how people see themselves and how others see them.⁵

The media is another example of how an institution expresses cultural racism. The immense power of media to name "reality" subjectively seems apparent. Since I have written elsewhere on this subject, I shall not dwell on it here.⁶

In spite of the tremendous power of language to influence cultural norms, the attempt to discuss linguistics in terms of race (or gender and sexual orientation) seems to spark a lightning rod. Too often, linguistic challenges are dismissed as "pandering to political correctness." Cultural racism is not about political correctness; it is about who gets to define language and establish and sustain cultural norms. It is about who gets to sit at the table and set agendas. It is about the need and the right to claim one's full humanity instead of accepting disrespect and varying degrees of dehumanization from others. It is about racist patriarchal supremacy. It is about power and freedom and justice.

Cultural Appropriation

There is probably no such thing as a pure religion or a pure culture. To some extent, we all appropriate culture. Since time immemorial, religions have borrowed from each other. Judaism was shaped in part by encounters of the ancient Hebrews with the Sumerians, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians. Similarly, Christianity is rooted in the Jewish tradition, Islam begins with both the Jewish and Christian traditions, and so on. In these modern times, with international tourism and media connecting people throughout the world, there is now a greater opportunity for cultural misunderstanding and misrepresentation, and hence, the concern about misappropriation and cultural preservation of indigenous cultures.

How can cultural appropriation be defined? First, it is most often a form of racial or religious prejudice, or in the most general terms, cultural appropriation is a form of plagiarism. It is consciously or unconsciously seeking to emulate concepts, beliefs or rituals that are foreign to a particular framework, individual or collective. It is incorporating language, cultural expressions, forms, lifestyles, rituals or practices, about which there is little basis for direct knowledge, experience or authenticity, into one's being. It is also the superficial appreciation of a culture without regard to its deeper meaning. And finally, cultural appropriation is acting in ways that belie understanding or respect for the historical, social and spiritual context out of which particular traditions and cultural expressions were born.

The second principle of Kwanzaa, *kujichagulia* (or self-determination), provides a framework from which to examine cultural misappropriation as one dimension of cultural racism.⁷ From a political standpoint, self-determination means that people have the right to determine how they will be governed. Dr. Ron Karenga, who gave birth to this ritual, says that self-determination is the right "to define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves instead of being defined, named, created and spoken for by others,"⁸ I would extend the definition further to say that self-determination is a basic human right. In a Unitarian Universalist context, it also means the right to interpret one's culture and theology.

It has been argued that Unitarian Universalism, particularly our approach to religious education, represents a "creative integration of cultures," with an acknowledgment that the new creation is just that – *new*. Such a critique raises important questions, among them these:

- How does "creative integration" of cultures honor and respect the root culture that sparked the development of the *new*? Is the *new* simply a cheap imitation?
- Who are the teachers and transmitters of racial, cultural and religious identity? Can or should such traditions be taught or transmitted only by a "native" of that tradition? If not, what is the standard of measurement by which authenticity should be measured?
- What is the source of racial or cultural identity? Is racial and cultural identity reserved only for those whose birth, history, or religious experience is firmly rooted in that culture? Or can one acquire an authentic identity from outside one's own culture of origin?
- What is appropriate and what is inappropriate cultural "borrowing?"
- What is the motivation for cultural borrowing? What is being sought, and why?
- How can cultural traditions that are not our own be honored, respected, appreciated, affirmed, and respectfully shared?

Instead of providing answers, I offer several scenarios to consider, around which discussions can be framed about the implications of cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation is problematic, in part, because it is rooted in the existing system of White power and privilege, and is based on the assumption that indiscriminate intercultural borrowing, transfers, or outright stealing are okay. Referring to the trend of

the past twenty-five years to market a distorted brand of "Indian spiritual wisdom" to White middle class consumers, Vine Deloria, Jr., a respected American Indian scholar, suggests that cultural appropriation is rooted in a deeper, albeit unconscious, motive:

White people in this country are so alienated from their own lives and so hungry for some sort of real life that they'll grasp at any straw to save themselves.... (H)igh tech society has given them a taste for the "quick fix." They want their spirituality prepackaged in such a way as to provide *instant insight*, the more sensational and preposterous the better. They'll pay big bucks to anybody dishonest enough to offer them spiritual salvation after reading the right book or sitting for the right fifteen-minute session. And, of course, this opens them up to every kind of mercenary hustler imaginable. It's all very pathetic, really.⁹

If a sports team misappropriates a name that is clear negative reference to Native Americans, for example, "Redskins," it is as disrespectful as referring to an African American by the "N" word.¹⁰ If a North American manufacturer offers a new line of clothing inspired by patterns, styles, or fabrics created by the Andean people, it is plagiarism to name the new line "Andean." If a European American woman believes that the cowrie shell is reminiscent of female genitalia, it is dishonest to place it within a West African context if that interpretation bears no relationship to that culture.

I do accept that many of the goals of those who support cross-cultural borrowing, as far as I can discern, are completely honorable. Often the motivation is simply appreciation for some element of a culture. In fact, sometimes the goal is to honor diversity and serve as a means to help break down barriers. In general, I do not believe there is an intention of malice or ill-will. However, naiveté seems to characterize the actions of many who find themselves in a delicate place relative to intercultural relations. At other times, as Deloria suggests, the motive is less clear, or more self-serving. Regardless of motive, when cultural borrowing becomes cultural racism, the result is often disrespectful and can be painful to those whose cultural expression was borrowed.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are indeed unique in our approach to embracing other religions in worship, programming and religious education. We intentionally seek to learn about world religions and to share other cultural rituals and traditions. We lack depth, however, in our understanding of the historical, racial, cultural and religious context, as well as sensitivity to these contexts. At worst, our approach is assimilation, a combination of voyeurism and thievery, which in effect seems to say: from the distance of time and space, we have permission to take a myopic look at whatever culture we choose, and to beg, borrow or steal whatever we like, and make it our own.

An issue worthy of contemplation and extended dialogue is that cultural appropriation is based on the assumption that culture can or should be universalized – that anyone can become a part of any cultural or religious tradition – rather than culture arising out of

(and remaining within) a particular social, racial, religious or historical context. Two examples will illustrate the point.

I invited a friend, Shoshana Kaminsky, a Reconstructionist Rabbi, to attend a service for the Days of Awe (the Jewish High Holy Days) at a Unitarian Universalist church. Her response was quick and sharp. She flatly refused the invitation. "The High Holy Days," said the Rabbi, "are an observance of the *Jewish* community as a whole, and are a way of expressing religious unity in a place of *Jewish* worship. The liturgy is entirely in the plural: '*We* have sinned.' Worship in a non-Jewish setting seems to dilute the whole ceremony if non-Jews think that the 'we' means them," the Rabbi said. She is asking us to honor the historic, religious, and cultural *context* out of which the High Holy Days come. The Rabbi asks us to honor her tradition and culture in ways that she defines, and she challenges our unfounded assumption that we "honor" Judaism by celebrating Jewish holidays in a Unitarian Universalist context. The Rabbi's position is only one Jewish opinion, but it questions the very heart and soul of our approach to religion, which has multiple implications as *we* continue to struggle with the question of how to honor other religions and cultures. My question is: if Rabbi Kaminsky's view has any validity at all, how do we honor Unitarian Universalists for whom the Jewish heritage and tradition are important?

The celebration of Kwanzaa in our congregations presents a similar, yet different, concern. Although many of the principles of Kwanzaa are rooted in what I believe can become universal values, Kwanzaa is unique and particular to the experience of *African Americans*. Indeed, it was born out of the experience of struggle and redemption. It is a remembrance of how African Americans have been beaten down throughout centuries, and the ritual is designed to lift *their* spirits: "to define *ourselves*, name *ourselves*, create for *ourselves*, speak for *ourselves*"¹¹ and so on. Like the "*we*" in the Yom Kippur service, Kwanzaa's reference to "*ourselves*" (African Americans) becomes irrelevant if the pronoun refers to anyone and everyone present. For this reason, congregational celebrations of Kwanzaa need to be rethought. A radical position would be that Kwanzaa should be celebrated only by African Americans. A more liberal position would say that Kwanzaa cannot be celebrated authentically without African Americans leading the ritual, and that Whites who wish to participate as an act of solidarity can honor African Americans by substituting the word "yourselves" for "*ourselves*." In either case, it needs to be stated clearly that Kwanzaa's historical context is the suffering of *African American* people, and that the ritual is designed to affirm their commitment to self-renewal, self-reliance, self-determination, and self-redemption.

Though I have found ways to reconcile some of my own conflicts about this sensitive subject, I acknowledge that it is extremely complex. It is a tough issue. Just as we have assumed that we honor Judaism by celebrating Jewish holidays in a Unitarian Universalist setting, we have made the same assumption about Diwali, Ramadan, Kwanzaa, and special holidays and holy days of other traditions. As an American of African heritage, I have participated in many Seder meals and have felt perfectly comfortable doing so *when invited*. What has been uppermost in my mind in such

settings is that, in spite of the common experience of oppression of both Jews and African Americans, Passover is a *Jewish* story.¹² Therefore, I look to Jewish people for guidance and for leadership of such a celebration. Similarly, I occasionally fasted during Ramadan, not because I consider myself to be celebrating this Islamic tradition, but because it reminds me of my childhood and what I learned about fasting in a strict Christian environment: the value of cleansing, self-sacrifice, thankfulness, and refocusing one's energy toward the Most High. My Muslim friends who are aware that I sometimes join in this *ritual* at Ramadan seem to welcome the spirit of my intention.

Freedom and Rights

The dimensions of cultural appropriation are further complicated by questions of freedom and rights. Who is to say what practices cross the line between appropriation and misappropriation? Danielle Gladd, a student at Meadville/Lombard Theological School, offers this perspective on some dimensions of the subject:

I don't have the right to assume that any symbol, custom, clothing, ritual, literature, art or idea is mine for the taking, or critiquing and appropriating (or misappropriating) to meet my wants and desires. Every culture has value and meaning. They may seem primitive to the untrained eye, but the context and background from which these traditions emerged must be understood, respected and appreciated before making them our own.¹³

From my perspective, there is nothing inappropriate about a Kenyan wearing an Indian silk blouse or a Guatemalan woven belt, or a German wearing a shirt with a Mandarin collar or a Ghanaian Kente stole. These cultural creations are beautiful and have practical value. For a person of European American heritage, however to wear clothing reminiscent of a particular indigenous culture in an attempt to *be* African or Native American is typical of the *wannabe* syndrome – the notion that a particular racial or cultural group can actually become another ethnic or cultural group simply by learning the rituals and dressing the part.¹⁴ This syndrome expresses itself as cultural arrogance and misappropriation as well as internalized oppression.¹⁵ Andy Smith, Martin Marty (and no doubt others) have already written about the *wannabe*, syndrome,¹⁶ so I need not comment further.

When I was in seminary, I met a woman from Wisconsin of Dutch and Swedish heritage, who for five years had dated only Black men. She sometimes wore African style clothing and once told me that she felt that she must have been born with "an African soul." We became Friends because of our mutual interest in urban ministry. She took seriously the issue of being a white ally with oppressed communities. For example, she was a nurse in a poor urban area and over the years worked tirelessly with religious and secular organizations to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked. She also joined a Black United Methodist church. She went further. One day I came to class utterly amazed to see that my friend had gone to a black hairdresser to have her hair cornrowed in an African style. Later that year, a Nigerian friend invited her to visit his homeland. I was glad that she accepted the invitation. However, I realized while she was away that if we were going to remain friends, I must engage her in a conversation about my concern. The

