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"Cultural Appropriation": is it time for fair exchange?



It was reassuring to read this week that the scientific journal Nature has published a final consensus among scientists that animal life was originally formed from an aberration in the genome of a gelatinous blob-like organism known as a comb sea jelly. The Galapagos finches came along a lot later.

We have created cultures, which suggests that our gelatinous ancestor has granted us the gift of equality, if not yet universal liberty and fraternity.

The obvious outcome would be to share our cultures and borrow and lend where wanted, but recently, it seems that the Bible had a point about that.

There are major crimes of what can be passed off as downright thievery, which are generally justifiably laid at the door of beastly countries who ran empires.

Probably the most vexing controversy - revived recently during the new British King's Coronation - involved the notorious and glorious Koh-i-Noor diamond, set within a crown worn by the late Queen's mother at her husband's Coronation.

It was presented to Queen Victoria at the height of the British Empire, having been prized from the hands of a child Maharajah in India, and represents such a potent symbol of empire and conquest that it is unsurprisingly inflammatory to many.

But its provenance remains in dispute: it could be from India, Pakistan or Afghanistan.

The new Queen tactfully agreed not to sport it on the occasion in order to avoid protest, and no row ensued. But seen or unseen, it remains in the royal collection.

Less generously, the Cullinan diamond, a giant of its type, was also "appropriated" following the Boer War in South Africa, when Britain colonised it as well.

It still features in the King's crown, and several items of jewellery sported frequently by senior members of the royal family.

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Spoils of empire is one thing; contents of museums and art galleries another. Why, for example, is the Mona Lisa, commissioned by La Gioconda's husband (Italian); painted by da Vinci (Italian) displayed in the Louvre in Paris?

The answer seems in dispute: either da Vinci gifted it to his friend, King François I of France, who treated him better than the Pope did, or da Vinci left the painting to his apprentice Salai, who sold it to the king following Leonardo's death.

François, an art lover, happily paid in gold coins, therefore, if you monetise art, he and l'état had ownership.

Mussolini unsurprisingly wanted it back to Italy, but had other fish to fry, and the issue periodically arises and subsides in bilateral relations.

The British Museum has a full set of migraines of varying intensity. It houses the Rosetta Stone, which is of huge importance to Egyptologists as it enabled the understanding of hieroglyphs, pillaged from its native Egypt by Napoleon, then pillaged again by Britain post-Waterloo.

Arguably worse are the notorious Elgin Marbles, priceless sculptures chipped, gouged and damaged from the Parthenon in Athens by a philistine henchman of Lord Elgin, who unquestionably symbolised cultural appropriation and imperial arrogance.

It is difficult to see why they should not be

returned to the Acropolis museum, at least on a rotating basis, but pleas have so far fallen on deaf ears.

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The above is a list of the more egregious examples of questionable ownership. Which can fairly be described as unfair, if you believe that “fair” and “unfair” are legitimate concepts, which I personally doubt.

But “Cultural Appropriation” has now become a live issue in our current navel-gazing frenzy, and like the hydra, it has several more heads.

Food, and hairstyles appear to be the most significant areas of contention. I have not found any evidence that there are objections to my eating a panang curry despite the fact I am not Thai, but according to “influential” social media, there are objections to my eating it in a restaurant where the front of house is white, and the waiters and dishwashers are not.

In fact, anything on a non-Asian menu stating a dish is “Asian-inspired” is not acceptable, particularly when described by “white bloggers” as “healthy soul food recipes”, writes a blogger.

I regret that I lack the intellectual robustness to pay \$12 to read the “Feminist Guide to Eating Without Cultural Appropriation”, so I’m afraid we are missing out on that one.

Most complaints I have come across are simply about adapting a culture’s food to the tastes and preferences of another culture.

Any British visitor to India who has ordered a genuine Indian dish (“we know that chicken

tikka masala was invented in Glasgow, Scotland, but we want to eat what you eat”), will have witnessed the bafflement of a waiter, who is used to Brits demanding vindaloo (Portuguese) or naan (Persian).

Or how offended a Mexican might be by the shocker of TexMex, or a Vietnamese appalled by the outrageous addition of sugar to an American version of a Bánh Mi.

But Is this really a question of white supremacy?

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Bantu knots. Fulani braids. Cornrows. Some of the fabulous African-invented hairstyles which have been around for centuries.

It is deeply depressing to read that copying hairstyles can be offensive to Africans – because when white people emulate them they are seen as “erasing black hair culture”.

“Respect the roots of black hair and sign a petition to stop banning black hairstyles from work and school” suggests Team Ard. You are a victim of hair discrimination in addition to someone of a different culture unjustifiably stealing your hairstyles.

Ultimately, it boils down to whether you want to follow the rules of your chosen country of residence or not. It just seems rather sad that we cannot rejoice in sharing the spices of life.