



CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN THE WELLNESS SPACE

We are grateful to Deanna StandingCloud, Victoria Marie, Samsoche Sampson, Gabrielle Roberts, Kou Thao, and Daniela Montoya-Barthelemy for sharing and inspiring many of the ideas presented in this guide.

From yoga to "smudge kits," wellness is on trend. While wellness practices can help us to unwind and de-stress, they also raise major questions about cultural appropriation and theft from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities.

This guide explores how cultural appropriation negatively impacts wellness spaces, what to do if you spot cultural appropriation, and how to practice wellness responsibly.



Let's start with the basics to understand how cultural appropriation impacts wellness.

What is cultural appropriation, and why should I care?

We love author Maisha Johnson's definition of cultural appropriation: "a particular power dynamic in which members of a dominant culture take elements from a culture of people who have been systematically oppressed by that dominant group." Cultural appropriation involves profit, too. Members of the dominant culture almost always have the ability to profit off of what they've stolen, providing no compensation to those from whom they've stolen.

Cultural appropriation is a form of modern-day colonization and oppression that directly harms BIPOC.

It causes confusion for BIPOC seeking to learn about their culture and identities. And, it causes biological harm because BIPOC can no longer connect with traditional practices that helped them regulate their nervous systems, reduce inflammation, and maintain holistic health.

What does cultural appropriation in wellness spaces look like?

Cultural appropriation runs rampant within the **\$4.2 trillion** global wellness industry. Examples of how cultural appropriation takes place in wellness spaces include:

- “Smudge kits” sold by non-Indigenous individuals and retailers
- Pricey yoga classes that emphasize fitness and burning calories (rather than yoga’s roots as a free, devotional practice)
- Using words and phrases like “tribe” or “spirit animal” when they’re not part of your culture
- Designer gym clothing featuring the Hindu Om symbol
- Misusing spiritual objects such as scriptures, crystals, and statues of Buddha

What do we lose when we allow it to happen?

Cultural appropriation denies BIPOC communities access to wellness practices (due to high prices and toxic power dynamics, among other elements). In addition, it strips wellness practices of their authenticity and sacredness. When a practice is appropriated, we no longer understand its origins and true intent. Without the sacred, we feel displaced from our ancestors and othered in spaces that are supposed to bring us healing.



How can I practice wellness responsibly and avoid cultural appropriation?

Seek out teachers who are part of the community from which your specific wellness practice originates. Try out different instructors from within that community. Look beyond what's most popular or readily available.

Normalize asking questions and having difficult conversations. Practicing wellness with integrity means speaking honestly with your teachers and yourself. Here are a few to ask your teachers:

- Where did these practices come from?
- Who did you learn from?
- Is this part of your ancestry?
- Did you get permission to do this outside of your ancestry from your teacher?
- How would you feel about me passing this on to people?
- [If you come from privilege, or if you're able to help]: how can I help the community from which this practice originates?

Learn more about your own culture and ancestry. We all have different stories and traditions. By healing through our ancestors, we can begin to address the trauma that we see today.

Step outside of your comfort zone. Go somewhere where you're out of place, and you'll better realize the hard questions you need to ask yourself.

Practice mindfulness. Be present, and be intentional with everything you do. Hold the question of "What is sacred here?" and ask yourself if you're doing the sacred justice or distorting it in some way. Consumption and consumerism have removed the sacred from so many aspects of our lives.

What should I do if I see cultural appropriation happening?

The answer is simple: call out cultural appropriation when you see it. Approach the person or group with good intentions, knowing that they may have a lack of understanding. Tell them how and why their actions are hurtful.

Tips for white allies:

BIPOC are repeatedly asked to educate others about cultural appropriation. Do not further this pattern. Take on the work to educate yourself, and call out cultural appropriation when you see it.

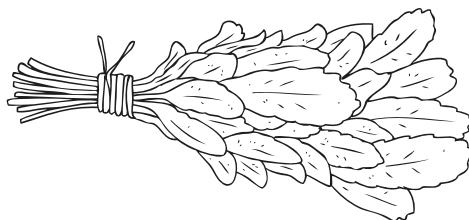
Sample language for calling out appropriation: “Hey, using the phrase ‘spirit animal’ harms Native people because it appropriates their culture. Next time, can you try something like ‘inner avatar’ or ‘secret twin’ instead?”

Avoid retraumatizing BIPOC communities when calling out cultural appropriation. If, after doing your own research, you’re still not sure if something is cultural appropriation, have a conversation with a friend who’s from that culture. (But, do not ask them to do the work for you!)

Tips for BIPOC:

Check in with yourself first before taking action. Repeatedly calling out cultural appropriation is draining emotional labor.

Trust your intuition when approaching those who are appropriating.



How can BIPOC who weren't raised with their ancestral practices access them without feeling like outsiders?

Accessing your ancestral practices when you weren't raised with them can feel daunting. Before you get started, set your intentions and begin calling in the teachers that you're seeking. Do your research, and let your community know about your goal to reclaim your ancestral practices. When you're able to connect with someone who feels authentic to you, start learning.

While you're on your journey, seek out others who are taking similar paths. Lean on each other to feel grounded.

Don't assume there's a right way to connect: discover what this means for you. Be open to finding teachers in unexpected places.



Resources for further learning:

- [The White Sage Black Market](#)
- [When Non-Native People Burn Sage, It's Cultural Appropriation—And We Don't Support It](#)
- [Native Appropriations Blog](#)
- [It's Hmong, not "Tribal"](#)
- [Yoga in America Often Exploits My Culture—But You May Not Even Realize It](#)
- [How Wellness Got Whitewashed](#)
- [To Some, Mindfulness Feels Too Whitewashed to Embrace](#)
- [Not Your Idea: Cultural Appropriation in the Birthing Community](#)