

Cultural Appropriation and the Spreading of Zimbabwean Music: *Kutambarara*

The motivation to hold a panel discussion on the topic of cultural appropriation arose after one of the Colorado bands shared with the ZA Board some comments an audience member had made questioning the appropriateness of an American band playing Zimbabwean marimba. Issues of appropriation arise every so often within our mostly-white North American community, and Zimbabwean music lovers exhibit a wide range of awareness and perspectives on them. We—the Zimfest 2018 Organizing Committee and the Board—felt it was time for a discussion around this often-sensitive topic, in an attempt to build respect and understanding for the culture and dynamics of power underlying the music and its spread. In the months since that decision was taken, I have been engaged in two further email conversations around questions of cultural appropriation of Zimbabwean music, perhaps a reflection of the current divisive political climate. To my mind, everyone who is involved in this music should be aware of the issues of cultural appropriation and should inform themselves not only about the background of the music, but the sensitive underlying issues. I present the following as an introduction to ways of thinking about the topic of cultural appropriation, influenced by the words of many, but inevitably colored by my own perspectives.

What is cultural appropriation? Culture may be defined as the entire package of beliefs, ideas, practices, speech, and material objects associated with a particular group of people. Appropriation implies some sort of theft; it is the illegal or unjust taking of something that doesn't belong to you. Yet people of different cultures have been interacting for thousands of years, and mutual adoption of external or foreign practices among people of different groups is a natural phenomenon. One perspective on cultural exchange maintains that we are all appropriating each other's cultural elements all the time; there is no pure, indigenous culture as we are all the result of mass migrations, historically influenced by other peoples. The sharing of ideas, traditions, and material items makes life interesting and helps diversify the world. Critics point out that cultural exchange becomes problematic when there is an unequal power relationship between the groups. An accepted definition of cultural appropriation is “the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society” (Oxford Dictionaries). The power dynamics between dominant and disenfranchised cultures is important, because when the playing field isn't level, cultural exchange can become a one-way process.

Why does it cause offence? Adoption of elements of a minority or disenfranchised group by members of a dominant culture often results in harm or detrimental effects for the members of the minority culture. Consider, for example, material or ritual items of another culture such as Native American/First Nations decorations worn by people who have no interest in, or understanding of, their cultural significance. When these artifacts are regarded as objects that merely “look cool,” or when they are mass produced cheaply as consumer items, people who venerate and wish to preserve their indigenous cultural traditions are likely to be offended. Using elements of another's culture as a commodity or stereotypical costume is definitely not cool.

Further, you don't get to decide what is cultural appropriation for another cultural group; they do. What one person may think is a tribute, people of the other group may perceive as disrespectful. Some ways in which cultural appropriation is offensive or harmful include:

- Power imbalance: the dominated group has little or no say in what is adopted or how it is represented.
- Inaccurate portrayals of the culture often result.
- Insensitivity: sometimes something culturally sensitive can be used inappropriately causing offence.
- Links to colonialism and racism: in many cases, cultural appropriation is sensitive because of a long history of subjugation in its most negative form.
- Payment: with appropriation, nothing goes back to the community of origin. Often there's no copyright in place to be enforced.

Appreciation vs. appropriation: I just wanna play the music! The line between musical appreciation and appropriation is a fine one, easily blurred. It's not as if every instance of participating in another culture counts as appropriation, and it can be difficult to determine what is and isn't harmful. Some points to consider:

- If you have an interest in another culture, do your research and make it a point to really **learn** about it. That way, your portrayal is less likely to come across as ignorant or disrespectful.
- There is potential for appreciation to be misunderstood but engaging with other communities by whatever means possible—discussions, student-teacher relationships—enhances mutual appreciation.
- Consider how someone from the other culture group might feel about what you are doing. If the source group or culture has a history of colonial or other exploitation, be aware that there is already a social power dynamic at play regarding the use of their culture.
- Are the people/the culture from whom these items or practices come benefitting?
- If your purpose is to make a fashion statement, look cool, perpetuate stereotypes, misrepresent, or simply profit from another culture, you are edging into appropriation. Don't do it.

Kutambarara: Spreading the music. Dumisani Maraire, who introduced marimba and mbira at the UW and taught so many of us in the Pacific Northwest and beyond, generously shared his music with Americans. Spreading Zimbabwean music was his chief legacy worldwide, but he knew that his teaching opened the door to cultural appropriation. Alongside his encouragement of his students were strong messages of reproach about what he considered mis-appropriative behavior and cultural imperialism: mis-representing the music and culture, not giving credit where credit is due, failing to pay royalties. The dual message is embodied in Dumi's signature piece "Kutambarara" ("Spreading"), which rang out in mbira, marimba, string quartet and choral versions over the last decade of his life. While applauding the spread of Zimbabwean music, his lyrics describe the African rejection of European oppression and representation—*Vachiponda vamwe* (They were beating them down); *Tese tati kwete* (We all said no!)—but his liner notes add that not all non-Africans have oppressed Africans: "Music can dismantle cultural, political

and racial barriers” (“Kutambarara” notes, *Pieces of Africa*, Kronos Quartet CD, 1992). We, Dumi’s students and descendants in this music community, would do well to recognize the dialectic, a built-in tension, that is ever present in teaching and/or performing Zimbabwean music: the joyful positives in spreading the music always already coexist with some form of appropriation.

- Claire Jones, Seattle, WA 2018