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## 4 Ways To Honor Native Americans Without Appropriating Our Culture

August 26, 2014 by [Taté Walker](#)

I recently had a friend – *a nice white lady I've known for years* – ask me whether buying moccasins for her infant son would be considered cultural appropriation, and therefore offensive.

She has read my many rants on things like hipster headdresses and Native American mascots, and she wanted to make sure that she wasn't doing anything to warrant my Lakota wrath or a hashtag like #NotYourBabyFootware or whatever.



Source: National Congress of American Indians

I'll tell you what I told her: **There is a fine line between appropriation and appreciation.**

When Natives decry the wearing of faux headdresses at music festivals and in fashion spreads, or when we protest the use of our imagery on underwear and football helmets, we're asking people like Ted Nugent and Pharrell Williams and institutions like the Washington Redskins to stop profiting from stereotypes proven to harm and dehumanize Native people.

Of course Nugent, Washington NFL team owner Dan Snyder, and an unfortunately long string of others would tell you they are, in fact, *honoring* Native Americans with their dictionary-defined racial slurs and fake, mocking accessories.

**But the savvy among us know appropriation encourages the dominant culture to forget Natives are modern, contemporary people struggling to overcome nearly 600 years of campaigns to wipe us off the map.** Who cares about epidemic rates of unemployment, academic failure, or youth suicide when your football team wins, am I right?

That said, **there are many ways to truly honor and appreciate each of the 566 unique, federally recognized tribes in the US**, and that includes adorning your kid's toes in some comfy mocs (but not their head in a headdress).

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With that, I give you four ways to honor Native Americans without dehumanizing them.

## 1. Support Native American Artists

There are some pretty stiff and costly penalties for those who violate the [Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990](#), which essentially says you have to be a member of a federally or state recognized tribe or certified as a Native artist by a tribe in order to sell items marketed as Native-made, or tribally-specific products.

And before you claim that this law gives some kind of special treatment to Native artists or takes away from free market enterprise, consider all the ways the government has tried to wipe Natives from the map, including [criminalizing our spirituality until 1978](#) and restricting our living and movement to isolated reservations.

Neither of these actions was good for business, especially when many of our wares are connected somehow to our spiritual foundations. We continue to fight for fair access to that same free market you value, and the IACA is our best chance at leveling the playing field.

Despite this, folks still misrepresent our wares, and faux headdresses and made-in-China dreamcatchers proliferate the “Native American” marketplace. This not only offends many of us on a racial level, but **it takes away the livelihood of authentic, Native artisans who learned their craft through many generations.**

Let me tell you: There is no comparison between a rug manufactured in an overseas shop and one handmade by a sixth generation Navajo weaver.

**So go ahead and buy those cute moccasins for your kiddo, but make sure you’re buying from a legit seller** and ask to see an authenticity certificate or other form of tribal identification.

That will ensure you’re honoring a specific Native heritage and getting the best product. For more, check out Nooksack artist Louie Gong’s [Inspired Natives Project](#).

## 2. Learn About (and Consider Backing) Native-Led Movements

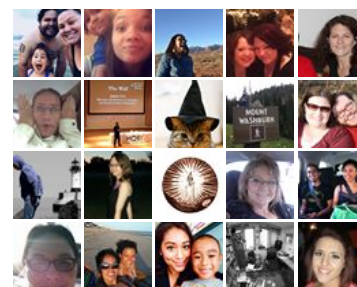
In addition to protesting racist mascots and offensive fashion accessories, Native communities are also fighting to end violence against women, staging huge rallies to protect the environment, reforming justice and education, revitalizing indigenous languages, teaching spirituality, and *so much more*.

**We often support these movements simultaneously and understand the relationships and connections between each of these issues our communities face.**

I personally advocate for four solid organizations, three of which are led by strong Native women — including [Eradicating Offensive Native Mascotry](#), the [Save Wjyabi Project](#), [Tatanka Wakpala Model Sustainable Community](#), and the [Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies](#).



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In addition, I'm what my people call *winkte*, or Two Spirit, the tribal equivalent of LGBTQ. It is a vitally important issue for me, and I often speak and present on issues relating to sexual identity/orientation within Native cultures.

**I encourage you to check out these groups and consider supporting one or many movements.**

If you seek out others, a few tips: Before involving yourself with an organization, do some research on its board of directors, its founder or CEO, and its outcomes. Ask around about it, and make sure it mirrors your personal values.

### 3. Call Out Appropriation Because It's Offensive (Not Because You Know I Won't Like It)

A white friend recently posted a short rant about an offensive Halloween magazine advertising, among other things, an "Indian princess" costume.

She didn't say, "My Native friends will hate this!" or "I have Native friends and I'm appalled!" She simply noted all the offensive material (Halloween needs some work, folks), and said she planned on burning the magazine and using the money she saved on costumes to buy more candy.

Posts like these, in which **people call out the offensiveness of mascots or headdresses without making the problem my responsibility to fight** (*there are those who simply link me to a post – "Taté Walker, did you see this? What do you think?" – without necessarily being offended themselves*) make me want to hug someone.

I love when a non-Native person *gets* something others would see as a Native-specific issue.

**Dehumanization is an issue for everyone to be concerned with**, and I am proud to say I have many non-Native friends who step up to hipsters and sports fans alike to call out misappropriation when they see it.

Not sure what qualifies as appropriation? Check out the site [Native Appropriations](#) by Adrienne Keene, the lady I want to be when I grow up. She does a wonderful job informing the public about a wide range of indigenous issues.

### 4. Support Non-Native Companies or Organizations That Actively Honor Native Culture and/or Creations

It's easy to get caught up in all the ways that celebrities and companies and organizations are screwing over Native people. **But it's also important to promote and support those doing good by their indigenous fans, followers, and customers.**

Canada's Bass Coast Festival **banned headdresses** at its music shindig earlier this month in a move that had many of us cheering.

Similarly, after a "Native American Heritage Night" **fiasco** in which some Natives were detained

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by security and police for challenging a rival fan for wearing a fake warbonnet, the San Francisco Giants added “culturally insensitive” garb and behavior to the list of things like foul language that could get baseball fans ejected from the ballpark.

A few years ago, after hosting an offensive Native-themed party (*we’re talking glow-in-the-dark war paint and plastic tomahawks, folks*), Paul Frank Industries apologized and immediately collaborated with Native American artists to design [a collection of clothing and accessories](#). I have no problem buying those monkey shirts for my kid knowing this company champions contemporary and authentic Native design.

And I have to throw in a plug for my girl [Shoni Schimmel](#), who is tearing up the hardwood and helping draw mass crowds at every WNBA game she plays for the Atlanta Dream. The Thrilla from Umatilla isn’t the only indigenous player in the league, which is why I suggest checking out a game and supporting an institution that knows its Native players — and fans — are an integral part of their success.

\*\*\*

Many Americans have a disconnected relationship with indigenous peoples: We’re fine as romanticized historical centerpieces and entertainment props, but mocked and ridiculed when we decry the materialistic use of sacred objects like headdresses or call to remove a dictionary-defined racial slur like *redskin* from the NFL lexicon.

The message is clear to Natives: You can feel honored, or you can shut up.

But it doesn’t have to be that way.

There are ways you can honor us that don’t diminish the uniqueness of 566 federally recognized tribes down to a few, pan-Indian, stereotypical images that insult, degrade, and dehumanize my people.

You don’t have to dehumanize us to appreciate our many wondrous, individual cultures.

*Taté Walker is Mniconjou Lakota and an enrolled citizen of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe of South Dakota. She is a freelance journalist who lives in the Colorado Springs area. She blogs at [Righting Red](#) and can be reached on [www.jtatewalker.com](#).*

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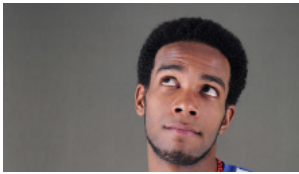
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**Erik Megalithic E** · [Follow](#)

I wonder if a movement to take back the Viking is out of the question. Not really flattering to see some fat guy with yellow yarn hair and helmet with horns mocking a warning sound across the fjords of Minneapolis. Or, maybe I'll laugh with him and not take everything as an affront to my ancestry. I could go either way with it.

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**Jake Villarreal** · Space Science Intern at U.S. Naval Research Laboratory

The Vikings are not a real, living, people being turned into props and offensive stereotypes for white people's amusement and profit, and have never been systematically discriminated against of the targets of a genocide by the hands of Americans

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**Jake Villarreal** Takk for mening, men du vet ingenting.

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**Unnur Helga Möller** · Works at Íslenska óperan

**Jake Villarreal** You'd be amazed though





...and you can be amazed though.

As a person brought up reading/living/named after/in the world of those 'not real people' (who were indeed not a tribe. Viking is actually a job title) it sometimes stings a bit so see trashy TV pretty much brake all that verses in the old books, brutalize our language to make it sound 'exotic' and see a culture that is a part of ones literary and cultural heritage turned into a farce.

- I'm with Erik on this. You know, we might not be native americans, and we might not be 'discriminated against in the american media' as they are, in a terrifying and brutal fashion (perhaps as we do not happen to be a part of American history, even though our ancestors -did- discover Vinland long before Columbus did, and we are white after all), but we, the nordics, have a culture. Personally, it irks... [See More](#)

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**Minda Fraser** · Follow · Top Commenter · Hiking at Pacific Crest Trail

There are other cultures that can make quality woven rugs too ya know, even people "overseas". Just because you are honoring a specific culture- doesn't give you the right to put other cultures down and make them appear less than. - Okay gotta go rock my bindi and tall mocs with the cute fringe -while blasting K-pop and plan out how I'm gonna pay for this Honda CRV I really want to drive to and from my favorite country/folk summer concert venues. Cause life is good yo!

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**Minda Fraser** · Follow · Top Commenter · Hiking at Pacific Crest Trail

PS I'm half Philippine- Half Scottish - Born in Detroit - Raised in Florida. I'm not mad at people who want to wear kilts. I don't view it as an insult on my heritage or the pain of the crushing of the clans against the English Army. I don't get mad at people who wear the Native Barong of the Philippine culture-- they are so classy and comfortable!!

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**Bree Herndon** · Top Commenter

Did you hear the whoosh when the point of this article went right over your head?

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**Minda Fraser** · Follow · Top Commenter · Hiking at Pacific Crest Trail

**Bree Herndon** Since you clearly can't comprehend my reply - let me spell it out for you dear. There are many ways to celebrate and honor all cultures. It is okay to like cultures and be inspired by them. Appropriation is being thrown around too much. Not everything is done in hatred or with a disrespect toward the past disadvantages of specific groups. KAY.

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**Ashley Kristina Suhr** · San Jose State University

Thank you for your words. It's nice to have some specific resources available to those of us who wish to support Native people and culture without crossing over into cultural appropriation. Every day my awareness of the issues impacting Native Americans is increased by people like you, and I appreciate the opportunity to learn.

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**Roger Diamond** · Top Commenter · Schenectady County Community College

A fifth would be for American History teachers and professors across the U.S. to acknowledge that the U.S. Constitution was based on the Iroquois Confederacy.

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**Hilaire Phillips**

Actually, in some schools it is taught and I know that it's in my son's history book. But we aren't in the public school system either.

Reply · Like · August 28 at 12:45pm



**Roger Diamond** · Top Commenter · Schenectady County Community College

**Hilaire Phillips** That's good, but it needs to be mandatory knowledge for students to graduate.

Reply · Like · 3 · August 28 at 3:55pm



**Hilaire Phillips**

**Roger Diamond** I agree. The problem lies in that the people making the decisions regarding education write their own version of history. And this problem runs deeper in our schools than most people want to believe.

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**Chris Castanon**

Thank you.

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**Shawn Klaus** · Follow · Top Commenter

So if my little girl wants to be Pocahontas or Sacajawea for Hallowe'en, I have to tell her no? I don't think so.

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**Desirée Gomez** · University of Washington

Wow, that must be SO difficult for you -- what a hard life!

No. Luckily your family won't have to suffer the racism and exploitation faced by Native communities, not to mention the invisibility/lack of representation, the poverty on reservations, the hypersexualization and the higher rates of rape and sexual abuse for Native women...

Don't even get me started on the REAL stories of Pocahontas or Sacajawea...

You could, as a parent, y'know, teach your daughter that dressing up in caricatures of people of other cultures is not okay. It's really a shame that that's too hard for you.

Reply · Unlike · 27 · August 28 at 10:00pm



**Vted Vital** · Kandahar, Afghanistan

If that's what you got out of this article, then go right ahead. Being culturally sensitive takes dedication and discipline; something most people seem to lack today. I know you have both these skills somewhere in your life, with work or family etc. If only you could say to yourself, "My daughter can still have fun and dress up WITHOUT using an entire race's misfortune brought upon by Europeans to my advantage." It adds insult to injury. I say that mindset would be something to be proud of.

Reply · Unlike · 6 · Edited · August 28 at 10:14pm



**Wendy L. Peterson**

Desirée Gomez Well said! My husband and children are Lakota. I had a doctor from India ask me if he could borrow my little girl's regalia for his child to wear to school on "culture day"! Unbelievable.

Reply · Like · 4 · August 29 at 12:53am

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**Natalie Serendipity** · Follow · Top Commenter · California State University, Northridge

Cultural appropriation is an interesting subject. I am Jewish. When Christians celebrate Passover, as a reenactment of what they presume to be that last supper of Jesus, is that cultural appropriation? We certainly don't celebrate it that way, and the injection of Jesus into our ritual can feel obtrusive. When I visited Krakow, Poland, which had a thriving, large minority of about 30% of the population before WWII and only 10% of Polish Jews survived at all), and see the carvings done by Christians representing the Jewish music and ways of worship, I felt molested. Certainly no Jews were benefiting from these carvings.

So, yes, I have a few artifacts that were given to me by Native Americans, including a Navajo Wedding Vase, an Eastern American corn doll, beaded earrings, and a beaded turtle, but somehow I feel this is not eno... [See More](#)

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**AmarDev Kaur** · Uh, yoga teacher. at Yoga Teacher

I really like the first paragraph of your post; I was just thinking similar things .... Jews are always the exception though -- accepted targets. (I don't mean I was specifically thinking about Passover, the seder, or Jesus' insertion into the mix. Though I must say regarding that that from what I understand, Christians do not 'celebrate' Passover at all but rather only hold seders in order to learn about their Lord.)

Anyway, I believe that if you (or anyone) as a Jew were to write such an article that (to my mind/ eye) is basically a list of demands about how people must be treated, it would not be well-respected, and perhaps only might get circulated as a laugh, for comedy's sake. Besides which, where in the Christian world can one go and not find appropriated place names? I mean, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania? What's that about? It's not respect, that's for sure!

Personally I don't believe throwing this question out to the world of non-Jews is (usually, in most cases) going to get you an answer that understands anything about where you're coming from -- because people don't.

The world is not educated about Jews or Judaism, only Jews are.

Interestingly, though, Korea -- South, obviously -- has opened one of the Earth's largest Talmud study centres.

I would say this is a high compliment that is a real investment and wanting to connect -- because they already feel Koreans and Jews have a lot in common to start with -- and that is very good news.

Reply · Like · August 31 at 1:25am



**Bevan Jones** · The University of Edinburgh

It's interesting that Taté invites anyone, regardless of ethnicity, to take up Native American causes. I wholeheartedly agree: you should listen to your conscience no matter your skin color. However, there are many who regularly dismiss any protests of misappropriation on the grounds that you aren't a member of the offended group and therefore have no right to speak on their behalf. Frustratingly, there's a seed of truth to that claim, even if it is misplaced.

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