

Cultural Appropriation or Religious Syncretism?
An Analysis of the “Tarot of the Orishas”

A Thesis Presented

By

Rachel M Park

Presented to

The Department of Historical and Political Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Degree of a Bachelor of Arts in
International Studies

Arcadia University
May 2022

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1. Introduction

Witchcraft, Paganism, Wicca, and other types of magical spiritualities have gained massive popularity and representation in popular media in recent years. These modern alternative spiritualities evoke images from rituals and spells to chakras and yoga. As these practices gain popularity, the amount and availability of spiritual paraphernalia has skyrocketed.

A significant number of practitioners of modern alternative spiritualities adopt rituals, histories, and worldviews from at least one culture that is not their own. This process, called cultural appropriation, can cause harm to those whose culture is being borrowed from. Scholars, activists, and spiritual practitioners continuously debate the question of how harmful the process is and whether it is an unavoidable consequence of globalization and religious syncretism. The texts, communities, and other resources these practitioners learn from can influence their usage or non-usage of cultural appropriation.

The frameworks academia uses to value and prove knowledge are very colonial, operating in a framework of epistemicide, or the attempted elimination of undesirable systems of knowledge. Much of the literature on witchcraft focuses in on the "undefinable" nature of magical religions which positions the author as the knower and revealer of secrets in order to ground their own authority, and simultaneously constructs these religions as less knowable and less valuable areas of study. This goes back into the system of epistemicide that academia evolved from - problematizing things that don't fit into the established system of knowledge. Further, scholars that do write about magical religions in a decolonial manner "are often condemned as essentialist, escapist, naive, or in other ways apolitical and backward thinking" and end up marginalized and silenced within academia. It is also difficult to reproduce this type

of knowledge within the restraints of academic forms of communication due to word count or time limit.

I reviewed the literature on the cultural appropriation of spirituality to understand the forces that drive cultural appropriation and the pushback against it. Consumerism heavily influences the process of cultural appropriation. The widespread commodification of ideas and values enables the consumption of spiritualities much like the material goods that practitioners may also purchase. The power dynamics between those engaged in cultural appropriation and the group from which they appropriate influence the negative effects of appropriation. The hierarchical power structures of race, class, and colonialism characterize acts of cultural appropriation. Whether an act of borrowing is syncretism or cultural appropriation can often be determined by examining these power differences.

The materials that practitioners of modern alternative spiritualities use embody the immaterial processes involved in cultural appropriation. These immaterial processes - consumerism and colonialism - heavily influence how and why cultural appropriation occurs. Examining different aspects of spiritual materials' origins, contents, and sale provides a deeper understanding of how consumerism and colonialism characterize the process of cultural appropriation.

This thesis will begin with a small autoethnography of how this research on magic, spirituality, and antiracism has been as much of a personal process as an academic one. Next, it will define and discuss cultural appropriation, modern spiritualities that commonly culturally appropriate, as well as the religions discussed in "The Tarot of the Orishas." Following this context, there is an examination of the relationship between magical religions, spiritualities, and academia. Then there is an examination of the scholarly debate on the harms and ethics of

cultural appropriation. Through object ethnography, this thesis examines cultural appropriation through the lens of the materials used by spiritual practitioners. Specifically, the thesis analyzes “The Tarot of the Orishas,” its authors, and context in order to demonstrate the nuances of cultural appropriation in the context of power differences within colonialism and consumerism.

2. Reflection

I have always been enchanted with magic. Growing up as an only child, I had to tap in to my surroundings to fuel my imagination. I loved to collect rocks and make potions, forage mushrooms and talk to forest spirits and fairies. In my teens, I started exploring religion and what it meant to me, since I had not grown up in a religious household. I was looking for something otherworldly for comfort, but my interactions with Christianity just didn't provide that feeling I was looking for. I still felt like I believed in some spiritual force in the world, but I didn't have any kind of framework to develop that belief. When pagan witchcraft started to appear in popular discourse, I felt very connected to it. I was still collecting crystals, so I started exploring my spirituality from there. There was a lot of information about using different crystals in spiritual practices, so I began to read about the Chakras that aligned with crystals, what minerals were good for what problems, and how to divinate with crystals. I then began to search online for a community dedicated to providing newcomers like me resources to develop their craft. I was recommended different books, spells, rituals, and specific spiritualities that I might want to try. I consumed these and adopted some things into my developing practice. My primary practice involved divination through Tarot cards, which is still an extremely trendy practice, even for people who are not involved in other pagan witchcraft practices.

I remember when I first encountered the mention of cultural appropriation in the context of spirituality. Someone had pointed out in one of the groups I was in that Tarot is considered a

closed practice and using it was cultural appropriation. I didn't have a great idea of what this meant – of course I had heard the discourse about dreads and festival costumes being cultural appropriation, but it had not occurred to me that spiritual practices could be appropriated in the same manner. When I probed the commenter about this, they pointed me to the Facebook group that inspired this topic choice. The group is dedicated to educating practitioners on cultural appropriation, and recommending vetted, ethical, anti-racist resources for practitioners of any level of experience.

3. Key Terms

To begin, I would like to establish a few working terms that will be used in this essay and what they will be referring to before fully defining them. Witchcraft is a finicky concept that is “relegated to the academic periphery” and is “defiant of academicisation” (Murrey, 2017).

Magic, briefly, is an action that is often practiced in the different spiritualities that fall under witchcraft. Popular pagan witchcraft, or neo-paganism, is a grouping of spiritualities that share a reverence for nature and life in all things, communion with the spirit realm, and cultivation of spiritual power (Hillen, 2020; Possamai, 2002). These spiritualities tend to be very consumerist and heavily culturally appropriative from many cultures, mostly Native American spiritualities. The rise of different spiritualities under the umbrella of popular pagan witchcraft is linked to growth of industrialism, colonialism, global capitalism, and neoliberalism.

Wicca is the most prominent pagan witchcraft, so much so that colloquially Wicca and witchcraft are synonymous. Wicca blossomed in England in the mid-twentieth century as a product of multiple cultural developments, such as the respect of the shrinking countryside and the long trend of magic being a counterculture to the rational industrialist culture (Hutton 2019). Because of Wicca's popularity and the wide accessibility of materials, it frequently is the first

form of codified magic new practitioners see, particularly in the United States and England. Many of its founding ideals, writings, and founding members, have been scrutinized as racist, sexist, and appropriative. Some magic practitioners from the United States are actively decolonizing their practices and spreading information to other practitioners about how to be anti-racist in their respective magical practices. A heavy emphasis is placed on identifying which practices are open or closed. An open practice is one that anyone can participate in, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or proximity to the traditions. A closed practice is either one that requires initiation (i.e., Judaism would be considered a closed religion, as one can become Jewish, but must go through a process of conversion) or one that requires being part of a particular culture or ethnic group. These practitioners place a heavy value on educating white practitioners about decolonizing their practices, as well as centering marginalized voices.

It is difficult to define witchcraft for a few reasons. Practices associated with witchcraft span a variety of spheres such as “magic, sorcery, religion, folklore, theology, technology, and diabolism” (Burton Russell and Lewis, 2020). Depending on what region or time, the practices included in witchcraft can vary and even be contradictory to other forms and definitions of witchcraft. Witchcraft occupies a liminal space; it exists outside of binary concepts like helpful and harmful, sought out and avoided, other and us. Because of its liminality, a concrete definition would be quite difficult to produce and almost certainly be inaccurate. Hutton offers multiple definitions of witches, reflective of common perceptions of witchcraft throughout time (2019). A witch could be defined as someone who “uses magic to harm others,” or as “a strong-minded and independent woman, victimized to subdue or destroy her in order to reinforce patriarchal authority,” or as “a practitioner of a surviving or revived pagan religion” (Hutton, 2019). Hutton argues that these definitions are all valid and accurate ways of describing what a

witch is. Magic and witchcraft are separate terms, though they commonly are equated. Magic is one of the many practices involved in witchcraft; however, not all spiritualities label their actions as magic. Magic can be described as having the aim to “influence the normal course of events through nonordinary means” (Berger 2006, pg. 2).

The following analysis of “The Tarot of the Orishas” does not specifically focus on how practitioners of popular pagan witchcraft use the deck. The analysis will examine the religious and cultural context of the deck’s creation more in depth to contrast the appropriation within the deck itself and in the context of the broader use of similar materials by practitioners of popular pagan witchcraft. “The Tarot of the Orishas” was written by Zolrak, a priest of Candomblé. Candomblé is a syncretic religion blending the African religion of Yoruba with Catholicism. This specific blending occurred from the forced assimilation of African slaves in Brazil, developing parallel to other Yoruban syncretic religions such as Santería in Cuba.

Zolrak, however, speaks in great lengths about Umbanda. Umbanda is a syncretic religion like Candomblé that incorporates elements of the European tradition of Kardecist spiritism, Orishas (Yoruban supernatural entities, similar to deities), and Catholicism. In Zolrak’s telling of the inception of Umbanda, he explains that the souls of Black slaves and Native Americans “[need] to repair past errors.” To do so, they would need to work through mediums who would embody their spirit for a time. Zolrak notes that these souls could not manifest themselves within the existing Kardecist Spiritism, as “they were souls bearing little karmic charge.” The souls were not able to, or chose not to, participate in Spiritualist sessions because of their “spiritual condition.” So, these souls sought a place in “Africanism” where “although they were not discarded, they still did not have a place within the practices” since “pure Africanism is not worked with egúnes (spirits of the dead).” Zolrak explains that this spiritual necessity of

Black slaves' and Native Americans' souls caused the formation of Umbanda (2013, pg. 268-269).

4. Academic knowledge, cultural consumption, and contemporary witchcraft

The undefinable nature of witchcraft leads to an avoidance of the topic in academia. In addition, some of the most significant parts of witchcraft are not quantifiable or able to be explained in a rational, empirical form (Murrey 2017). Regardless of the topic's reluctance to be academicized, there is still a small area of scholarship regarding witchcraft. However, much of this literature spares little attention to the racialized and colonial context of academia's framing of witchcraft. The literature of witchcraft has established and is established by a framework of the "epistemicide" of non-Judeo-Christian practices and knowledges (Murrey, 2017).

A decolonial analysis of witchcraft would require the scholar to successfully navigate through academic tendencies to "romanticise, appropriate, and exotify" witchcraft and other spiritualities (Murrey, 2017). The concept of the "Noble Savage" was established to pose solutions to new, industrial problems. Now academics and other subcultures instrumentalize the "Noble Savage's" knowledges and closeness to nature to counter alarming environmental issues and spiritual and cultural belonging. Another issue that scholars face in writing about witchcraft, as well as other areas of study, is the positioning of the author as the knower and revealer of secrets to establish their authority (Aldred, 2000). This constructs witchcraft as a less knowable and less important area of study than Judeo-Christian practices. Additionally, scholars who can successfully write about witchcraft in a decolonial manner "are often condemned as essentialist, escapist, naive, or in other ways apolitical and backward thinking," leading them to be silenced and marginalized (Keating, 2008). Reproducing the nuances of witchcraft also requires more

than academic forms of communication that often restrict the complexities and fluidities of witchcraft to a word count or time limit (Keating, 2008).

Concurrent with the rise of neoliberalism and consumer culture is popular pagan witchcraft, or neo-paganism, which is a grouping of spiritualities that share “a reverence for nature and life in all things, communion with the spirit realm, and cultivation of spiritual power” (Hillen 2020, Possamai 2002). New Age and Wicca are both examples of spiritualities falling under this umbrella. These spiritualities appeal to the considerable number of people who feel “uprooted from cultural traditions, community belonging, and spiritual meaning” (Aldred, 2000). These feelings are symptoms of the growing consumer culture, yet these practitioners “pursue spiritual meaning and cultural identification through acts of purchase” (Aldred, 2000).

These purchases still do not satisfy practitioners’ desires, so they search for meaning in other cultures’ spiritualities to deepen their own. Practitioners will search for fulfillment in the rituals, objects, and spiritual knowledges of groups who they see as possessing the values of community belonging and strong cultural traditions. Quite often, they find these values in groups whose spiritualities were previously demonized, such as Native American spiritualities and African diasporic spiritualities. This “cultural consumption” and commercialization of minoritized spiritualities operates in and takes advantage of the hierarchical structures of power and race (Possamai, 2002). The concept of cultural appropriation is one of “a variety of moral investigations” of the power relations between the groups from which culture is being exchanged (Borup, 2020). For example, some African diasporic spiritualities syncretize African Tribal Religions and Catholicism. This exchange and use of spiritual knowledges does not fit the negatively connotated process of cultural appropriation because the practitioners of African diasporic spiritualities are not obtaining this religious knowledge from a position of power. The

neo-pagan consumption of cherry-picked rituals, materials, and knowledges from a range of minoritized and racialized religions does constitute cultural appropriation because their access to those materials is dependent on their position in the hierarchy of power.

The issue of cultural appropriation has real world consequences. Burning White Sage, a space-cleansing ritual known as Smudging, is an Indigenous practice performed by tribes in southwest America and northwest Mexico, where White Sage grows natively. White Sage is regarded as a sacred plant in these tribes. It is used in specific rituals that non-Indigenous people tend to ignore or not know of when they burn sage. This is one of the most commonly appropriated practices in popular pagan witchcraft. Due to this practice's popularity with non-Indigenous people, access to the plant has been made difficult to Indigenous people. The commodification of this sacred plant has led to it being classified as endangered, as well as limited access to it for Indigenous practitioners.

The spiritualities involved in the process of cultural appropriation and anti-racism are diverse and nuanced. Whether they are syncretic African diasporic religions or syncretic New Age practices, these spiritualities do not fit neatly into one subgrouping without essentializing them in some way. It is important to be able to examine these spiritualities in groupings to understand their influences on cultural appropriation and anti-racism. However, because of the colonial context of academia, it is a challenging task to create terminology to reference to these groupings, and even more complex to do so in a decolonial and anti-racist perspective. This essay has begun to delineate some terms that will be used in the further thesis, define and give context to witchcraft's space in academia, as well as describe cultural appropriation and its role in spirituality. This knowledge will be applied to a critical analysis of materials that are used in spiritual cultural consumption to further understand the mechanisms of cultural appropriation

within spirituality, as well as the materials that are curated to combat the appropriation and colonization of spirituality.

5. Cultural Appropriation in Modern Alternative Spiritualities

A significant number of practitioners of modern alternative spiritualities adopt rituals, histories, and worldviews from at least one culture that is not their own. The texts, communities, and other resources these practitioners learn from can influence their usage or non-usage of cultural appropriation. Before critically analyzing this process, this literature review will further define what ‘modern alternative spiritualities’ are, demonstrate the multifaceted debate around what cultural appropriation is, explore the driving factors of cultural appropriation, and discuss the comparative lack of scholarship regarding the cultural appropriation of African Traditional Religions and African diasporic religions.

The topic of cultural appropriation is contentious within and outside of academia. Particularly debated are the issues of whether cultural appropriation is harmful to affected communities, along with the question of the ethics of cultural appropriation. Much of the literature agrees that neoliberalism and consumerism heavily influence modern alternative spiritualities that culturally appropriate (Aldred 2000; Borup & Fibiger 2017; Carrette & King 2005; Jocks 1996; Possamai 2002; Taylor 1997; York 2001; Ziff & Rao 1997). While there is ample debate on the ethics of the spiritualities that utilize aspects of Indigenous spiritualities (Aldred 2000; Possamai 2002; Taylor 1997; Ziff & Rao 1997), there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the spiritualities that use the knowledges of African Traditional Religions or diasporic religions (Hillen 2020; Murrey 2017).

While many authors have offered definitions for specific movements in the realm of ‘modern alternative spiritualities’ (Aldred 2000; Berger 2006; Borup & Fibiger 2017; Hutton 2019; York 1999), fewer have proposed parameters for a grouping that adequately encompasses the modern spiritualities that engage in cultural appropriation (Carrette & King 2005; Hillen 2020; Possamaï 2002). While it is easy to imagine such a group, scholars disagree on the boundaries and contents of this grouping. Some claim there is no definitive meaning for spirituality in general. Any attempts of definitions would be a disservice to the intricacies of the practices and cultural contexts they exist within (Carrette & King 2005; Hutton 2019).

York begins to define this group by looking at the distinguishing factors of New Age and neo-Paganism. He argues that although the two spiritualities both can engage in cultural appropriation, they are distinguishable by the fact that Neo-paganism is based on an invented or erroneous history, while New Age "makes little or no attempt to identify with earlier forms of spirituality" (York 1999, 141). Carrette and King view New Age, as a “melting-pot of religions and spiritualities,” and create their own grouping of spiritualities differentiated by their interactions with capitalism (2005, 14).

Possamaï creates a classification of spiritualities distinct from their relations with capitalism. He argues that New Age and neo-Paganism are examples of “perennism” which he defines as a “syncretic spirituality” with the following characteristics:

- (a) the world is interpreted as monistic (the cosmos is perceived as having deeply interrelated elements with a single ultimate principle, being, or force, underlying all reality). The notion of dualism, e.g., mind/body is rejected.

(b) perennists attempt to develop their potential human ethic (actors working towards personal growth).

(c) followers of perennism are engaged in a search for spiritual knowledge (personal development through a pursuit of knowledge, whether it is knowledge of the universe or of the self, the two being sometimes interrelated). (2002, 199)

Hillen offers similar criteria for this group, referring to it as “popular Pagan witchcraft” (2020). There are two main differences between Hillen and Possamai’s groupings. First, Hillen argues that instead of a monistic worldview, these spiritualities view that there is life in all things leading to reverence of nature (2020). The second and main difference is Hillen proposes that this group is not a distinct group; rather, it is a discursive formation, or “discursive context” (2020, 21). The terms ‘popular Pagan witchcraft,’ ‘modern alternative spiritualities,’ and ‘perennism’ generally would include the same spiritualities; however, only Hillen specifically analyzes modern witchcraft. Hillen argues that while popular Pagan witchcraft could be analyzed alongside other alternative spiritualities such as New Age and neo-Paganism, it is “its own distinct and contemporary formation” (2020, 9).

Much of the literature on these spiritualities explores the question of cultural appropriation. The most general aspect of cultural appropriation in religion is the usage of traditions, myths, and symbols of one group by another (Borup 2005, 2017; Possamai 2002; Taylor 1997; Ziff & Rao 1997). This general definition does not include anything that overtly references the common debates surrounding the issue of cultural appropriation. Borup argues that cultural appropriation involves a “moral investigation” of the usage of other cultures’ spiritualities (2005). He also emphasizes the role of “ownership, representation, and identity formation” in this process (Borup 2005, 231). Similarly, Possamai posits that a critical evaluation

of cultural appropriation involves an examination of the hierarchical power structures involved in the exchange – in the case of spiritualities, power structures involve race, class, and colonial contexts (2002).

Taylor argues that there are three responses to Borup's moral investigation. While these responses are specifically about the cultural appropriation of Native American spiritualities; the essence of the responses can be applied to other situations. The first group believes that acts of cultural appropriation erase Native American spiritualities by changing them as groups selectively borrow spiritual practices and/or perpetuating the incorrect idea that Indigenous spiritualities "are dead and in need of resuscitation by whites" (Taylor 1997, 184). The second group believes that the process of borrowing from Native American spiritualities does not result in cultural appropriation because "the resulting phenomenon is no longer Native American religion" (1997). The third believes that the borrowing involved is an inevitable and significant trait of religious evolution; to characterize this process as immoral would lead to the preferential treatment of one religion over another (1997). Similarly, Borup argues that a more widespread condemnation of cultural appropriation would be harmful to religious scholarship (2005). Taylor argues that an analysis of the morality of an act of cultural appropriation would ideally need to be case-by-case.

Many scholars argue that consumerism has a prominent role in cultural appropriation (Aldred 2000; Borup 2020; Carrette & King 2005; Jocks 1996; Possamaï, 2002). Aldred argues that consumerism has led to the "commodification of ideas and values" (2000, 346). Corporations have marketed and sold "religious buildings, ideas, and claims to authenticity" to both get a profit and promote corporate capitalism (Carrette & King 2005). Carrette & King claim that "in a context of individualism... 'spirituality' has become a new cultural addiction and

a claimed panacea for the angst of modern living” (2005, 1). People seek community in response to the alienation felt from capitalism. In some cases, spiritualities like New Age form where the community that they seek is an imagined one that can be accessed through acts of consumption. New Agers will buy texts, accessories, as well as experiences such as rituals and workshops to feel part of a spiritual community (Aldred, 2000).

Other authors have commented on cultural appropriation as a process of consumption (Aldred 2000; Possamaï 2002; Ziff & Rao 1997). Possamaï argues that the consumption mentioned by Aldred extends beyond objects and experiences to “religions/spiritualities, Indigenous culture, history and popular culture.” (2002). While New Agers may consume texts and objects, neo-Pagans consume aspects of histories and cultures to invent their own history of their religion (Possamaï 2002; York 1999). Wicca, the most prominent neo-Pagan religion, created a history in which their current practices are the remnants of an ancient Pagan religion in Europe, pre-Crusade and pre-Salem ‘witch burning’ (Hillen 2020; York 1999). Possamaï argues that cultural consumption is a separate process from cultural appropriation. It can have the same ill effects as cultural appropriation and/or lead to it (2002).

When discussing the power dynamics involved in cultural appropriation, scholars typically do so in reference to Indigenous spiritualities. Most of the literature around cultural appropriation examines the effects of this process through the lens of New Agers appropriating Indigenous spiritualities (Aldred 2000; Borup & Fibiger 2017; Hillen 2020; Possamaï 2002; Taylor 1997; York 1999). Some scholars examine cultural appropriation and syncretism in modern Buddhism (Borup 2020; Borup & Fibiger 2017; York 1999). Few, however, discuss the trend of modern alternative spiritualities appropriating from African Traditional Religions or diasporic spiritualities, i.e., Hoodoo, Conjure, Ifá, and Santería (Hillen 2020; Murrey 2017).

Murrey examines the relationship between academia and witchcraft, focusing on African epistemologies. Though her argument is contextually about what academia imagines pre-colonialism Indigenous spiritualities to be, it follows that an examination of the cultural appropriation of African Traditional Religions relies on an academic understanding of ‘witchcraft’ in Africa. She proposes that the topic of witchcraft is “relegated to the academic periphery” due to its defiance of “academicisation” (2017, 1). Academia prioritizes concepts that can be discussed in terms of “rational thought...logical reasoning, and empirical demonstrations,” leading to what Keating describes as “academic spirit-phobia” (2008, 55). Even though meaningful and critical examinations of witchcraft can be achieved, how these spiritualities can be best understood is through “spiritual epistemolog[ies]” that are typically cast aside in scholarship (54).

Not only are these examinations disregarded by general scholarship, but authors who analyze spirituality in this way are also “condemned as essentialist, escapist, naïve, or in other ways apolitical and backward thinking” (Keating 2008, 55). The scholarship on witchcraft that does operate within the confines of academic ‘rules’ must be written in a very conscious manner to avoid perpetuating the academic tendency to “romanticize, appropriate, and exotify non-Judaeo-Christian and pluriversal spiritualities and epistemologies” (Murrey 2017, 4). Additionally, scholars that focus on the difficulty of defining witchcraft position witchcraft as less knowable and therefore less important than Judaeo-Christian practices. These works create an air of secrecy and position the scholar as knowing these secrets to better ground its own authority (2017).

Some scholars’ responses, along with pop-cultural representations, recharacterize these spiritualities as peaceful or as forms of “idealised resistance” (Murrey 2017, 4). This is still

harmful – it reproduces a similar Othering to that of the ‘Nobel Savage,’ “in which the Other’s statically essentialized incorruptibility and closeness to nature could be instrumentalised to offer solutions to modern industrial problems” (4). This specific Othering echoes the above argument that spiritual cultural appropriation is not only a response to the feelings of alienation brought by consumerism, but also uses consumerism as a vehicle for said appropriation.

There are significant hurdles to cross to produce a critical examination of the cultural appropriation of ‘minoritized’ spiritualities without perpetuating colonial ideals. This is especially so in the realm of academia where colonial forms of gathering and presenting information are still enforced. The following analysis of how cultural appropriation and other racist ideologies are either perpetuated or confronted via spiritual learning materials will draw upon these works. Critically, it will challenge this academic spirit-phobia by combining an academia-friendly analysis with a spiritual epistemology. Through my own experiences, I will examine how new modern alternative spiritual practitioners may encounter unethical materials along with the process of unlearning unethical ideologies and practices within my own spirituality.

6. Methodology

Witchcraft, Paganism, New Age, and other types of magical spiritualities have gained massive popularity and representation in popular media in recent years. A substantial number of practitioners of modern alternative spiritualities adopt rituals, histories, and worldviews from at least one culture that is not their own. This process, called cultural appropriation, can cause harm to those whose culture is being borrowed from. I am arguing that the materials these practitioners use can tell us much more beyond whether they are culturally appropriative. The materials’ origins, distribution, and interactions with practitioners embody the immaterial processes that

characterize cultural appropriation. Other scholars have demonstrated that neoliberalism, consumerism, and colonialism heavily influence cultural appropriation. The hierarchical power structures of these factors also impact the harmfulness of cultural appropriation. My work extends the analyses done by these scholars, diving deeply into the life cycle of the physical materials practitioners use to demonstrate the enmeshment of the power structures and cultural appropriation.

I will examine various physical objects that practitioners of modern alternative spiritualities use, such as books, crystals, White Sage, cards, and ingredients used in spells or rituals. I will use websites dedicated to recommending materials for practitioners to select items that are commonly used in these practices, as well as locating online and/or physical stores that sell these objects. I will select an assortment of these materials and utilize object ethnography to dissect the intricate ways materials embody immaterial aspects of cultural appropriation. Object ethnography shifts the focus of analysis from how humans experience customs and culture to the non-human things that shape humans' social worlds. Analyzing and identifying the ways that spiritual materials shape practitioners' engagement, or lack thereof, in cultural appropriation will expand upon scholars' understandings of the power structures involved in the processes and outcomes of cultural appropriation.

7. Syncretism and Cultural Appropriation in “The Tarot of the Orishas”

Practitioners of modern alternative spiritualities use a variety of materials throughout their participation in spiritual activities, from the books that teach beginners to the tools used to conduct spells and rituals. The materials these practitioners use embody the immaterial processes, particularly capitalism and colonialism, which characterize cultural appropriation. Neoliberalism, consumerism, and colonialism create the conditions for cultural

appropriation (Aldred 2000; Carrette & King 2005; Possamai 2002). Additionally, the hierarchical power structures of neoliberalism and colonialism impact the harmfulness of cultural appropriation (Hillen 2020; Borup & Fibiger 2017). Building on these scholarly conversations, (Hillen 2020; Lenard & Balint 2020; McLoughlin 2019) my work demonstrates that modern alternative spiritualities' have a relationship with colonialism and thus produce the harmful effects via cultural appropriation. The specific items these practitioners use embody the forces that drive cultural appropriation. I will illustrate that "The Tarot of the Orishas" - a deck of cards with symbolic imagery used for divination and has an accompanying book - embodies the complexity of cultural appropriation by diving deeply into the life cycle of the physical materials. Then I will investigate the materials' role in cultural appropriation or syncretism by utilizing object ethnography to show the enmeshment of the material and immaterial realms of cultural appropriation. The information gathered will show how this deck exemplifies the nuance of cultural appropriation in syncretic religions, particularly in Brazil, and how a symbol of "racial consciousness" can also be a means to further Brazil's "politics of whitening" (Nobre 2018).

The following analysis will first give a brief background of the primary religions written about in "The Tarot of the Orishas," Candomblé and Umbanda, and their reception in Brazil. Then it will examine the way Zolrak's discourse reflects one of the many nuanced interpretations of Umbanda, as well as the cultural heterogeneity of syncretic religion in Brazil. The discourse from the book is presented alongside context of Brazil's "politics of whitening," which attempted to scrub African elements out of the country's multiculturalism. Finally, it will examine the role of Indigeneity in Umbanda and the Noble Savage discourse and imagery present in Zolrak's interpretation of Umbanda.

7.1 Tarot and Romani

One of the most widespread methods of divination, commonly called fortune-telling, is cartomancy – divination via cards. The most popular type of cartomancy is the reading of Tarot. With its significant presence in popular culture and the availability of decks appealing to various aesthetics and subcultures, it is a practice that many people, spiritual or not, have adopted. The Tarot of the Orishas is a deck of cards, only loosely based on the traditional Tarot despite the name, along with its accompanying book authored by Zolrak and illustrated by Dürkön.

The practice of divination with Tarot cards originates from the Romani people, who have been subject to discrimination and violence, both historically and currently. It is important to note that while there is little academic literature on this origin, Romani history has mainly been survived orally for reasons similar to those discussed in Section 4. When Roma have been stateless or impoverished, they have often at least been able to make money using these fortune telling methods. This work then became stigmatized, to the point where in some places in the United States it is illegal to read Tarot for money (Brown 2011). When contrasting their experience to non-Romani witchcraft practitioners gaining money and not being stigmatized for it, the power imbalances that characterize cultural appropriation are plainly evident.

7.2 Candomblé, Umbanda, and the Politics of Whitening

Umbanda was a target of the "politics of whitening" conducted and encouraged by the Brazilian government; portions of the religion that were more directly associated with Africanism were characterized as "black magic," dangerous, and evil (Nobre 2018). The religion was legally and socially stigmatized since its inception; however, middle class whites were intrigued by the less "African" parts of the practice. Because of this interest, there was a shift

from the banning of the religion to the sanitizing of the religion so those whites would be able to comfortably participate in it. A key event in the process of "the de-Africanization of Umbanda's origins, and the purification and whitening of the practices" was the Primeiro Congresso de Espiritismo de Umbanda held in Rio in 1941, in which some of Umbanda's religious leaders codified aspects of the religion. One way this Congress de-Africanized the religion was by eschewing the Bantu origins of the term and asserting that it derived from "the Sanskrit words Aum+Bhanda, which means 'the limit of the unlimited'" (Nobre 2018, pg. 42-43). To create additional distance from the African elements of Umbanda, the Congress leaders dichotomized the practices associated with the religion into Umbanda, centered around "charity and white magic," and Quimbanda with black magic (Nobre 2018, pg. 42-43). Nobre contends that, despite Umbanda going through a phase of reclamation by Afro-Brazilians, the whitening and appropriation by middle class Brazilians has opened a space for various interpretations of the religion (Nobre 2018).

Zolrak's interpretation of Umbanda is reflective of this process of whitening. In affirmation with the Congress, he presents the reader with the alternative Sanskrit etymology of the term Umbanda (Zolrak 2013, pg. 265-266). Additionally, in the section in which he writes about magic, he dichotomizes different practices as good and bad. Although he begins to comment on the error of categorizing practices as black magic and white magic by claiming that it depends on the practitioner and their intentions, he simply keeps the same dichotomy with different names: evil magic is sorcery or witchery, and good magic is magic (Zolrak 2013, pg. 257-258). Even if this false dichotomy could be corrected with different terminology, Zolrak would still fail to represent these practices properly, as he continues to use the terms black and white magic along with other hierarchical terms such as high and low magic or spiritualism

(Zolrak 2013). It is important to note that "...within the framework of resistance...Black sorcerers were important figures as symbols of resistance and were feared by the white slave owners" (Nobre 2013, pg. 43).

This characterization of Black slaves' and Indigenous souls is reminiscent of the colonial process of spiritual othering that "deemed the Indigenous people of Africa, Asia, and the Americas as spiritually inferior due to the 'absence of a Christian soul'" (Murrey 2017, pg. 3). Zolrak employs this exotification and distancing in his discourse throughout the book. He positions himself and scholars of the many fields he mentions (psychology, theology, geology, parapsychology, anthropology, philosophy, folklore, and archaeology) as the key to unravelling the mystery that is Africa. He claims that the aim of anthropological investigations in Africa "...is to get to the bottom of the mysteries still hidden there" (Zolrak 2014, pg. 9). Zolrak uses language to depict Africa as a mysterious, ancient, faraway place. On the first page of the introduction, Zolrak begins his book with a declaration of purpose: "I want to bring Africa, with its mysteries and myths, closer to us, and I also want to bring humanity closer to nature, which is no more and no less God's creation" (2013, pg. 1). In one sentence, he positions Africa - and the Yoruba religion - as distant and disconnected to the "New World" of the Americas.

Throughout the book, Zolrak refers to the Yoruba people in the past tense, often alongside pronouns that further illustrate the distance and disconnect between the original religion and its spiritual lineages. For instance, in the section titled 'Africa: Mother Continent,' Zolrak uses phrases such as: "The Yoruba were...", "The old Yoruba people...", and "these people believed..." (2013, pg. 12, 13, 15). Despite Yoruba being a robust ethnolinguistic presence in Africa and in Diaspora, their culture and religion specifically are being described as in the past. Additionally, by using the pronoun "these" in reference to Yoruba, Zolrak positions

himself, and other practitioners of the spiritual lineages of Yoruba, as other, separated by time and place.

7.3 Representations of Indigeneity in “The Tarot of the Orishas”

In the introduction of "The Tarot of the Orishas," Zolrak describes the "discovery of America." He opens this section by drawing a parallel between the discovery of the "New World" and the "discovery of knowledge that is remote but not lost in time, knowledge as old as humanity but as real and effective as the first ray of sun that created life on this planet" (Zolrak 2013, pg. 3). This parallel exposes a principal flaw in Zolrak's interpretation of Umbanda. Similar to how he positions himself and scholars as the responsible parties to unveil African mysteries, he also positions himself, and specifically this Tarot set, as a key to the "discovery" of Indigenous knowledges that "will make a contribution to our spiritual wellbeing" (Zolrak 2013, pg. 3). To establish this authority, he paints Indigenous Americans as temporally and spatially distanced, as well as extinct or near extinct. He states that "of those 'Indians,' as they were called, there remain only a few reservations throughout America, representing their right to keep a tiny portion of the lands of their ancestors. Others have disappeared with the passing of time" (Zolrak 2013, pgs. 3-4). Furthermore, he argues that civilizations such as the Mayas, Incas, and Aztecs, "were extremely learned in medicinal herbs and hallucinogenic plants that could very well be used today... (Unfortunately, they took these secrets with them to the grave)" (Zolrak 2013, pg. 4). Although it is true that colonization is responsible for the genocide of many Indigenous peoples and cultures, Zolrak fails to mention Indigenous Americans in the present as a living people who have retained their culture and knowledge.

The Native American spirits in Umbanda are called Caboclos, from the name given to those who had both Portuguese and Indigenous heritage, also known as mestiços (Nobre 2018,

pg. 23). The spirit of a Caboclo appeared to a practitioner of Kardecist spiritism and guided him to create the Umbanda faith (Nobre 2018, pg. 5). While some practitioners of Umbanda interpret Caboclos as the spirits of Indigenous people, others interpret them to be archetypes of purity, strength, and connection to nature, regardless of the spirit's last incarnation's ethnicity (Nobre 2018). This specific interpretation, as well as Zolrak's depiction of Indigenous people, mirrors the concept of the "Noble Savage."

Nobre begins to speak on the contradiction of the characterization of Caboclos in Umbanda and the "ideas of indigeneity asserted by the Indigenous peoples of Brazil" (2018, pg. 25). In an interview with an Indigenous Brazilian named Luar who does not participate in Umbanda, Nobre juxtaposes these conflicting views of indigeneity:

[Nobre]: "When Umbanda members incarnate the spirits of Caboclos they consider them an archetype of Brazilian Indigenous culture, they inspired them because of their courage and resistance against the colonizers, and because they symbolize the contact and harmony with nature."

Luar: "An archetype of the Brazilian Indigenous culture? What a crazy concept! They can't generalize, there are more than 400 Indigenous nations in Brazil. When one talks about Indigenous culture must know to which nation he is referring to, instead of including everybody under one idea. We do not communicate with the spirits because we think that they symbolize the contact with nature, we always communicate with them just like I am communicating with you. Everyone we talk to is a spirit, I am a spirit, you are a spirit." (Nobre 2018, pgs. 27-28)

While the focal presence of Indigenous Brazilians in Umbanda can be seen as a testament to the multiculturalism of Brazil, interpretations such as Zolrak's demonstrate an erasure of contemporary Indigenous Brazilians, such as Luar.

This section examined “The Tarot of the Orishas” and its representation of the immaterial processes of cultural appropriation, syncretism, and multiculturalism. This data shows that “The Tarot of the Orishas” demonstrates the complexity and nuance of cultural appropriation in a religion and nation that are renowned for their cultural blending. The materials readily available for practitioners of modern alternative spiritualities, like “The Tarot of the Orishas,” are an important aspect in the debate of cultural appropriation. Through the examination of other such materials, scholars and practitioners alike will have a deeper understanding of the way in which racial, historical, and class contexts intertwine in each examination of possible cultural appropriation.

8. Conclusion

As feelings of community belonging decrease in the current capitalist system, many people reach towards spirituality. However, the consumerism that caused this cultural uprooting reinforces the feeling by advertising spirituality and community for sale. A considerable number of practitioners of modern alternative spiritualities adopt rituals, histories, and worldviews from at least one culture that is not their own. The widespread commodification of ideas and values enables the consumption of spiritualities much like the material goods that practitioners may also purchase. The power dynamics between those engaged in cultural appropriation and the group from which they appropriate influence the negative effects of appropriation. The hierarchical power structures of race, class, and colonialism characterize acts of cultural appropriation. Whether an act of borrowing is syncretism or cultural appropriation can often be determined by

examining these power differences. To demonstrate the complexities of cultural appropriation within the intersections of different power differentials, this thesis analyzed a Tarot deck marketed to the practitioners of modern alternative spiritualities mentioned above.

The analysis first gave a brief background of the primary religions written about in “The Tarot of the Orishas,” Candomblé and Umbanda, and their reception in Brazil (Zolrak and Durkon, 2013). Then it examined the way Zolrak’s discourse reflects one of the many nuanced interpretations of Umbanda, as well as the cultural heterogeneity of syncretic religion in Brazil. The discourse from the book was presented alongside the context of Brazil’s “politics of whitening,” which attempted to scrub African elements out of the country’s multiculturalism. Finally, it examined the role of Indigeneity in Umbanda and the Noble Savage discourse and imagery present in Zolrak’s interpretation of Umbanda. “The Tarot of the Orishas” embodies the nuances and intersections in syncretism and cultural appropriation.

While many instances of cultural appropriation can be quickly and widely recognized and criticized, and should rightly be, some cases are intricate. Intersections of different power hierarchies, such as class, race, gender, etc.; religions; and cultures all impact the evaluation of the harms of an appropriated object. Because of the colonialist framework academia was built on, literature that discuss these intersections in detail and examines the ethics of complicated appropriation and syncretism is sparse. The continued examination of the objects spiritual practitioners use, both personally and academically, is a key step to address the ethics of the ways people attempt to alleviate the feelings of community uprooting and lack of spiritual belonging.

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