

## Knowledge and Indigenous Societies: Cultural Ownership

### Lesson 1: Opening Debate

**Focus:** *Should cultural expressions, such as traditional fashion, belong only to their originating communities, or be open for global use?*

<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Explore diverse perspectives on intellectual property, cultural appropriation, and the ownership of traditional knowledge. Recognize the tension between creative freedom and the protection of Indigenous cultural heritage. Introduce the concepts of ownership and power in relation to cultural knowledge.</b>
<b>Activities</b>	<p><b>1. Introduction (5 mins)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Present the central question: Should cultural expressions, such as traditional fashion, belong only to their originating communities, or be open for global use?</li><li>• Introduce the concepts of intellectual property and cultural heritage.</li><li>• Display a visual collage of Indigenous fashion designs alongside examples of their co-option by mainstream brands (e.g., specific tribal patterns appearing on mass-produced clothing, traditional motifs used without attribution).</li><li>• Ask students to consider:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ What do these images show?</li><li>○ Why might some people feel these designs are being appropriated?</li><li>○ What kind of knowledge is embedded in these designs, and how is this knowledge justified?</li></ul></li><li>• Share the <a href="#">Indigenous Fashion Collective</a> website as a general resource for students to review and go over the key terms and concepts.</li></ul> <p><b>2. Debate Setup (5 mins)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use the Kialo discussion: <a href="#">Should cultural expressions, such as traditional fashion, belong only to their originating communities, or be open for global use?</a></li><li>• Students will respond to the thesis: Cultural expressions, such as traditional fashion, should belong only to their originating communities.</li><li>• The discussion contains six starter claims to prompt students' ideas. These are listed below, along with potential counterclaims and areas for students to explore.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ PRO: Cultural expressions often carry sacred meanings and historical depth that global users do not understand or respect.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Counterclaim: Placing spiritual or sacred meaning above artistic freedom risks excluding others from learning or engaging with that culture.</li><li>■ Reasoning: Can cultural respect be upheld without enforcing strict boundaries on how others engage with that culture?</li></ul></li><li>○ PRO: Without protections, cultural expression risks being distorted, erased, or mass-exploited by those in power.</li></ul></li></ul>

- Counterclaim: It is impractical to regulate or “own” culture in a legal or moral sense — designs and patterns are fluid and spread organically over time.
  - Reasoning: What happens to cultural identity and meaning when traditional designs are divorced from their original context?
- PRO: Ethical consumerism includes understanding the origins and impacts of what we consume, especially when it affects marginalized communities.
  - Counterclaim: Consumers should have the freedom to wear and enjoy fashion from any culture — they aren’t responsible for how it was sourced.
  - Reasoning: Does consumer intent excuse harm, or should responsibility extend beyond personal taste?
- CON: Culture thrives on exchange and evolution — restricting access to designs stifles creativity and cultural dialogue.
  - Counterclaim: Indigenous designs are part of a community’s intellectual and cultural heritage and should be protected from unauthorized use.
  - Reasoning: Does drawing inspiration from a culture always honour it, or can it become a form of appropriation?
- CON: If done collaboratively, commercialization can bring financial benefits and global visibility to Indigenous creators.
  - Counterclaim: The co-option of Indigenous fashion leads to economic exploitation, with profits flowing to corporations rather than the original communities.
  - Reasoning: How can collaboration be genuinely equitable when global power dynamics are already so unbalanced?
- CON: Globalization encourages cultural mixing — trying to “own” cultural elements creates unnecessary barriers to exchange.
  - Counterclaim: There is a difference between mutual exchange and extractive appropriation — ownership is not about isolation; it is about consent and credit.
  - Reasoning: Is all cultural borrowing equal, or does historical context and power imbalance affect what is “fair” or “just”?

### 3. Debate (15–20 mins)

- Students present initial arguments, referencing examples like Urban Outfitters’ use of “Navajo” branding, Louis Vuitton’s appropriation of Maasai shuka, community backlash to runway shows borrowing tribal designs, etc.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage discussion by asking: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does using Indigenous designs without consent celebrate culture — or exploit it?</li> <li>Can fashion ever be truly respectful when created outside the community it represents?</li> <li>Is cultural exchange always mutual, or does power imbalance turn it into appropriation?</li> <li>If Indigenous culture is made visible through fashion, does that justify how it is used — or who profits from it?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Reflection Questions</b>	<p><b>Reflection (10 mins)</b> Discuss the following reflection questions in open discussion or exit ticket format:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who has the authority to decide whether cultural knowledge should be protected, shared, or commercialized?</li> <li>Is the debate over cultural appropriation primarily about ethics, economics, or power?</li> <li>How do social, historical, and political contexts shape our understanding of “ownership” in culture?</li> </ul> <p><b>Exit Ticket or Class Discussion:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can the use of Indigenous designs by non-Indigenous brands ever be truly respectful — or is it always extractive?</li> <li>How do your own cultural background and values influence the way you see this issue?</li> <li>What responsibilities do individuals and institutions have when engaging with knowledge rooted in marginalized cultures?</li> </ul>
<b>Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesson Slides</li> <li>Kialo Discussion: <a href="#">Should cultural expressions, such as traditional fashion, belong only to their originating communities, or be open for global use?</a></li> </ul>
<b>TOK Concepts</b>	<p><b>Power:</b> Who controls how Indigenous cultural knowledge is used, valued, or commercialized in global fashion?</p> <p><b>Perspective:</b> How do different cultural backgrounds shape contrasting views on appropriation, ownership, and creativity?</p> <p><b>Culture:</b> How is knowledge embedded in fashion expressions, and what happens when cultural meaning is removed from its original context?</p>
<b>Critical Thinking Concepts</b>	<p><b>Confronting Biases and Assumptions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying Cultural Relativism Bias: Recognizing the assumption that all cultural expressions are equally available for use, without accounting for historical power imbalances.</li> <li>Questioning Aesthetic Bias: Reflecting on how personal preferences for fashion or design might obscure the deeper cultural or ethical significance of what is being used.</li> </ul> <p><b>Exploring Contexts:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholder Analysis: Considering who gains or loses when Indigenous designs are co-opted, e.g., Indigenous creators, multinational brands, global consumers.</li> <li>Cultural and Societal Influences: Examining how cultural norms, colonial histories, and global capitalist systems shape what is seen as inspiration versus appropriation.</li> </ul> <p><b>Responsiveness and Flexibility of Thought:</b></p>

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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adapting Arguments: Adjusting one's stance when confronted with new cases or perspectives about cultural ownership and fashion ethics.</li><li>• Comparing Contradictory Perspectives: Weighing arguments about cultural protection against those supporting artistic freedom to find a more nuanced position.</li></ul> |
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