

Colonialism and Culture:

Untangling postcolonial threads hindering
ethical appropriation of cultural aesthetics
in Western Fashion

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Introduction

“Western fashion and dress is unthinkable without engaging with the role of Eastern influences.”

Adam Geczy

Fashion and Orientalism (2013)

Fashion, as a modern and western concept, relies on the dichotomous task of defining perceptions of trendy aesthetics for mass consumption, while maintaining a certain promise of individuality for its' consumers. This definition of fashion is built upon a “permanent drive for ‘change’ and for the ‘new’” (Geczy A, Karaminas V (2016) ;231). It is a model of fashion that “is connected to modernity’s permanent need to maintain a semblance of economic and narratological change,” a result of a “productivist vision” (Geczy A, Karaminas V (2016) ;231) and thus, fashion is developed to become a “manifestation of a process of civilisation, within a capitalist culture” (Gardetti, M. Á. & Larios-Francia, R. P. (2023)). Within this model, fashion becomes commodity, no more than a symptom of capitalism. As such, this dissertation will enlist definitions of fashion as “characterised by novelty, rapid changes, a proliferation of styles, and, more important, the mass consumption of fashion goods” (Thompson, C. J. & Haytko, D. L. (1997)) as being a product of western fashion.

This definition of fashion, by manufacture, is exclusionary. It assumes a dominant culture of being Eurocentric with a central purpose for commodity and consumption. Historically, non-western fashion has been perceived as being an opposing concept to western fashion through a perpetuation that it is “unchanging, encodes deep meanings, and projects group identity and membership (Craik, J. (1994) ;18) From this duality, western fashion finds fascination in drawing inspiration through “reimagining tradition” of other fashion in a desire to make it relevant for contemporary fashion markets. (Boğa-Moisin, M. (2023) ;93).

Concerned by this manipulation of cultural and traditional motifs of non-western fashion within this dominant model, this dissertation applies a critical lens in inspecting the intersections

between postcolonialism and fashion in contextualising the dominance of the western model, its unethical practices and exploitation of cultural heritage.

Chapter 1: *Patterns of Power* explores the dominant and Eurocentric model of postcolonial western fashion as the assumed model. This chapter investigates how the historical context of colonialism and its symptoms of western superiority inform social hierarchies within the modern western fashion system. Informed largely through the influential literature of Georg Simmel's *Philosophy of Fashion* and Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Through the exploration of discourse around cultural "othering" and "primitivism" within postcolonial critiques, this section navigates the ways in which postcolonialism echoes within the modern system of fashion. Additionally, this research explores the modern theory of transorientalism (national rebadging of culture for economic benefit) as coined within Adam Geczy's *Fashion and Orientalism* as further study into the fraught relationship between east and west within modern western fashion.

Chapter 2: *Appropriated Aesthetics* considers the various forms of the definition of cultural appropriation through finding distinctions within different frameworks of defining and using terminology to represent this practice of unauthorised theft. The research within this chapter compares definitions of appropriation through a diverse range of scholars in understanding what constitutes as an appropriation and the ways in which we can identify such assertions.

Chapter 3: *Popular Culture and the Colonial Gaze* amalgamate and contextualises the research gathered through exploring central patterns of exploitation within western fashion - hypersexualised fashion through study of the *cheongsam* and the practice of cultural costuming through the example of Native American fashion. Through a comparative approach considering global perspectives through popular culture as a social practice of embedding stereotypes, this research aims to highlight patterns of dominance that culminate in the appropriative behaviours of cultural fashion.

Chapter 4: *Case study of Western exploitation of Southeast Asian heritage* observes a personal stance on this area of study through the contextualisation of the exploitation of cultural heritage through the lens of my homeland, Malaysia. The nature of Southeast Asia as a historically colonised geography has meant an overlap in cultural practice and aesthetics across the countries within Southeast Asia. This research discusses the western appropriations of *batik*

and the *sarong*, as two influential and iconographically cultural motifs that have been exploited within western fashion through reference to the frameworks presented within previous discourse around appropriation.

In conclusion, through engagement with oriental studies, classifications of cultural appropriation, and study of continued exploitation of non-western craft and aesthetics, this dissertation intends to demonstrate the important practice of recognising appropriations within fashion and understanding the dangerous patterns that continue to oppress non-western fashion.

Chapter 1: Patterns of Power

The western fashion system relies on a hierarchy that demands social order. It makes distinctions across a series of binaries that separates the *feminine* from the *masculine*, the *rich* from the *poor* and the *local* from the *foreign*. Through this simplification, fashion removes the nuanced complexities that have culminated in western fashion's formation as a dominant model. In summary, this chapter seeks to observe western fashion's underpinnings as an industry built upon distinctions of power and dominance.

1.1 Representations of Fashion

Fashion's importance, within early 20th century western society, is prescribed within Georg Simmel's influential essay *The Philosophy of Fashion*. Here, fashion's societal importance is cultivated by the biological dualism of 'socialism and individualism' - to fit in while standing out. Simmel explores a primitive stance of the human condition in informing a modern fashion that gives way to a 'tendency towards imitation' while satisfying 'the tendency towards differentiation, change, and individual contrast' (Simmel, G. (1950)). Further to the dualism of fashion, Simmel proposes that fashion carries "the double function of holding a given social circle together and at the same time closing it off from others." Simmel extends this idea of social hierarchy through the distinction of the upper and lower stratum – at the point in which "the lower strata begin to appropriate [the upper strata's] style," "the upper strata turn away from this fashion and adopt a new one."

Opposingly, non-western modes of fashion, as previously described, act as an opposition to this dominant model. non-western fashions are conceptualised as embodying meanings of "spirituality, religiosity and fertility" (Craik, J. (1994) ;18), as well as reflecting "social hierarchies, beliefs and customs", however most important to its differentiation from western fashion is it's "unchanging" quality that turns non-western fashion in the eyes of a western observer to "costume". Hence, this author argues that approach to non-western fashion affirms European philosophy of "western cultures as civilised and other cultures as pre-civilised." (Craik, J. (1994) ;18)

1.2 Orientalism and Dominance

This argument of status and control within western fashion can be contextualised through an understanding of Eurocentric superiority as a symptom of postcolonialism. An argument for understanding this concept is presented by Edward W. Said in his seminal essay *Orientalism*.

Said, within *Orientalism* presents the Orient (the cultural East, spanning Asia, North Africa and the Middle East), as a “European invention” and as a “western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, E.W. (1978) ;3). The relationship between the two is a “relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony” (Said, E.W. (1978) ;5). Within *Orientalism*, Said explores various Orientalists’ stances and paints a picture of western superiority through the *Othering* of the Orient within western literature.

The trope of a stagnant, and unchanging culture as being one flavoured with exoticism, as explored within *The Face of Fashion (1993)* is an idea that Said also denotes - an unmoving and deeply complex culture with an emphasis of group identity. Said challenges that this western fantasy of the Orient as a series of “desires” and “projections”, is no less “shot through with doctrines of European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism, and the like, dogmatic views of “the Oriental” as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction.” (Said, E.W. (1978) ;8) Through a perpetuation of a narrative that remains as “Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant” (Said E.W. (1978) ;57), the west holds cultural colonialism over the East.

When comparing Said’s observations to Simmel’s cultural study of fashion from a western standpoint, usage of terminology that determines western fashion as the assumed clothing of “civilised people” supports Said’s commentary of the superiority, racism and imperialism that echo through the western models. A particular interesting text within Simmel’s essay supporting this argument considers the spectacle and demand for “foreign fashions.”

“On the other hand, there exists a widespread predilection for importing fashions from outside, and such foreign fashions assume a greater value within a particular social circle, simply because they did not originate here.”

The quote selected above serves to explore the western fad of foreign fashions wherein Simmel notes the “predilection” for imports as being of great value to western society. While this

“predilection” for foreign fashion may be interpreted as a flattering action, what this fascination denotes is a desire for the upper strata to exert an outwardly dominance through a procurement of foreign fashion without honest interest or care for the cultural fashions claimed. This quote highlights a detachment by the west with foreign fashion simple serving the role of the commodification of identity as an exertion of class within western society.

1.3 Transorientalism

This perception of the non-western *other* as the “foreign” culture is an idea that continues to remain an important site of discussion within fashion politics. Since the debates of Simmel and Said, there has been globalised progress within the fashion sector; the industry has become more interconnected, with the digital landscape bridging the east and west. As such, there is a question of whether these perceptions of western superiority remain, or whether they have evolved is a discussion that Adam Geczy approaches in his book *Fashion and Orientalism* (2013).

Informed by the initial Saidian framework presented within *Orientalism* in scrutinising the western perceptions of the Orient, Adam Geczy, coins a new term – transorientalism – in defining an emerging observation within fashion. Geczy defines transorientalism as “the mediated circumstances of the developed world, before it gets transformed into the ‘oriental’ exotic ‘other’ from which the westerner draws aesthetic and economic sustenance.” (Geczy, A. (2013) ;5) Discussions of power and dominance begin to shift within a globalised fashion industry. Transorientalism, through the *othered* fashions’ growing recognition within the global market has allowed for a shift in control. Through self-produced forms of orientalism by the cultural other, there is a regained control through “economic benefit or national rebadging.” (Geczy, A. (2013) ;5)

Transorientalism through national rebadging complicates the traditional order of power dynamics between the east and west. In this form of self-exoticisation of the cultural other for economic benefit, opposing arguments of empowerment and self-prostitution emerge. Geczy exemplifies the commodification of “chameleon-like adaptability” of Senegalese Sotiba fabrics in “offering out a vision of African-ness while catering to the expectation of the respective markets of what they may look like” (Geczy A, (2013) ;187). This example highlights how non-western fashions may be moulded for their own gain, but it is hard not to assert concern in

the commodification of national craft to fit the mould of the western fashion model. As well as this, Ann Marie Leshkowich aptly argues in their book *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalisation of Asian Dress*, “The extent to which Asian dress is reorienting fashion versus re-Orientalizing Asia rests fundamentally on who is performing, with what intentions, under what circumstances, and before what audience.” (Leshkowich A.M, Jones C, 2003 ;8) This is an increasingly important sentiment within the debate of western dominance as fashion through a trans-orientalist lens demands ethical presentation of the historically *othered* fashion in ushering forwards and decolonising the postcolonial perceptions of non-western fashion in modern settings.

Chapter 2: Appropriated Aesthetics

In recent times, the debate of *cultural appreciation* and *cultural appropriation* have become a forefront topic within the discussion of the ethicality of fashion inspiration from cultural aesthetics. This chapter seeks to clarify the variance in definitions of appropriation, as well as explore alternative terminology in relating the nuanced experience of cultural exchanges in building a reflective framework to judge modern cultural exchanges within.

One of the earliest, and most prominent, frameworks discussing cultural appropriation appears in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation (1997)* where the authors define *cultural appropriation* as a form of cultural transmission that involves “the taking – from a culture that is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expression or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” often “as a taking from a subordinate into a dominant culture.” (Ziff, B. H. & Rao, P. V. (1997))

Another argument that considers the highly nuanced and multi-dimensional practice of cultural appropriation suggests that cultural appropriation “is not always bad” when practiced as “cultural relativism” where there is a “mutually beneficial exchange.” (Boța-Moisin, M. (2023) ;93) In the cases of cultural relativism, the appropriation must be removed from the governance of colonialism and ethnocentrism. (a concept developed by William Graham Sumner in his book, *Folkways (1940)* that defines the belief that a particular culture is at the centre of the universe and is superior to other cultures.) This vague requirement of being free of ethnocentrism creates a blurry line that only further complicates the boundaries of cultural appropriation as a process of personal judgement.

Authors of *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation (1997)* offer another framework in which power is “constructed as central to the concept of cultural appropriation” (Ziff, B. H. & Rao, P. V. (1997)) in order to give clarity within the difficult judgement of exchange and dominance. What appears is a highly interwoven practice of cultural transmission, which separates cultural transmission into an assimilative or appropriative practice. Hence, cultural assimilation by the authors’ definition is described as “a process whereby cultural minorities are often encouraged, if not obliged, to adapt or assimilate to the cultural forms and

practices of the dominant group,” and cultural transmission is an appropriative practice “whereby dominant groups may be critized and challenged when they borrow the cultural forms associated with subordinate groups.” (Ziff, B. H. & Rao, P. V. (1997); 6) Without an exact understanding of what constitutes within the terms “encouragement” and “obligation” when identifying appropriation, the process of appropriation remains too nuanced to disentangle.

Alternatively, author Ming-Ha T. Pham, in *Racial Plagiarism and Fashion* (2017), argues for a separation from the terminology of cultural appropriation entirely. Instead, the term “racial plagiarism” is asserted as a more suitable term in describing the process of cultural theft as it “moves the discussion away from questions of personal intention and inspiration [...] to where it belongs: the fact, source and effects of this kind of unauthorized copying. (Pham, M.-H. T. (2017) ;73) Similar to the argument of Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, in their recognition of the “important questions of cultural appropriation” being the “political ones” (Ziff, B. H. & Rao, P. V. (1997) ;5), author Ming-Ha T. Pham, empowers that racial plagiarism is apt in “highlighting the racial relationships and inequalities that are obscured by terms like cultural appropriation, cultural appreciation, and piracy.” (Pham, M.- H.T. (2017) ;69).

When comparing the definition of appropriative practice of cultural transmission considered within *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (1997), to the observations made by Ming-Ha T. Pham in the immunity of scrutiny of western luxury fashion designers, there emerges a lack of ability to hold those in places of privilege and power accountable. This dissonance between theory and practice within the definition of appropriative practices as one that holds dominant groups accountable to being “critised” and “challenged”, highlights the true extent of western dominance and immunity within fashion. Moreover, Ming Ha T. Pham argues that because “high-end designers are routinely held up as sympathetic victims of fashion pirates,” to knockoffs and design pirates, western luxury fashion designers have developed an “impunity” in the guise of intellectual property to their theft of cultural motifs. (Pham, M.- H.T. (2017)

What becomes clear, through the contextualisation of diverse viewpoints on the nuances of the representations of cultural appropriation, is that it is a concept that is laden with a systemic hierarchy of power. As well as this, without true standardisation within the fashion industry in regard to cultural appropriation, infringements of culture will continue to be a discussion held

open by debate and excuse. While the definitions of cultural appropriation range across terminology such as cultural transmission, cultural relativism and racial plagiarism to varying degrees of critique of current practices of cultural exchange, it can be collectively agreed upon, across each inspected source, that cultural appropriation is universally understood as an exchange between cultures often weighted by racial motivation. In all manners, cultural appropriation echoes the lasting impacts of colonial privilege and hence, its perception of damage, in capitalist practice as suggested within the arguments of *Racial Plagiarism and Fashion* is warped by its consumption demographic. Just as Orientalism, discussed previously, dominates through the colonial practice of representation of the Orient through “authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it,” (Said, E.W. (1978)) cultural appropriation should no less be viewed as a continued cultural dominance.

Chapter 3: Exploiting cultural heritage

Undoubtedly, popular culture and fashion are intrinsically linked within western culture. Together, they reaffirm “mentalities, behaviour, aspirations and patterns of consumption, as well as ideals of beauty” (Peiss, K. (1998)) (Gundle, S. (2002)) that act as cultural standards. This chapter explores how popular culture functions to normalise the sexualisation and cultural costuming of aesthetic extraction of non-western cultural dress which then results in the repeated perpetuations of cultural motifs and symbols visualised within the fashion system.

3.1 Hyper sexualisation

During Hollywood’s golden age, cinema emerged as a powerful mechanism in projecting exploitative narratives of Eurocentric powers. Much like fashion, Hollywood functions as a hierarchical class system that commodifies marginalised aesthetics and propagates its values onto others through an appropriation. Glamour, through the reading of *Hollywood Glamour and Mass Consumption in Postwar Italy*, is described to be a “code of allure that required a person (usually a woman) to be fetishized as a fictionalized and surveyed object,” (Gundle, S. (2020)) that is dispatched as a political weapon against cultural oppositions. This model of political positioning through media is also true towards the presentations of *Oriental aesthetics* that is forced into “more and more standardised molds” and reinforced within an “electronic, postmodern world.” (Said, E.W., (1978) ;26)

One of the most enduring examples of the western propagation of oriental aesthetics can be found within Hollywood’s hypersexualised representation of the *cheongsam* beginning in the 1950s. While the cheongsam has come to exist as a fusion between Chinese traditionalism and western influence, with high slits, and a shapely silhouette, the context to which western perception of oriental women as a “goal of conquest” (Ling, W. (2007)) much alike to their lands, is a sentiment that is projected onto the western presentations of oriental women (Matsumoto, K. (2020)) through the presentation of the *cheongsam* as a hypersexual dress synonymous with prostitution and sex appeal.

In *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), a film by American director Richard Quine adapted from the book by British novelist Richard Mason, Suzie Wong, is a visual device used to construct Chinese identity through an orientalist lens. A young and beautiful prostitute in Hong Kong, Suzie is repeatedly costumed in revealing *cheongsams* marking her sexual availability to the

western male gaze, represented by American artist Robert Lomax. The film's choices for historical inaccuracies such as the white *cheongsam* as a western patriarchal fantasy of a virginal image, takes a Eurocentric approach that ignores the Chinese associations of white with death and mourning. This culturally dissonant acts as a showcase of *Oriental* fantasies that reduces rich cultural expression for exchange of Eurocentric desires. In this process, the *cheongsam* no longer acts as a presentation of cultural identity and national pride, but as a vessel for propagating the exotic fantasies of the western patriarchy.



Figure 1 Suzie Wong in a white cheongsam courtesy of Paramount Picture

This visualisation of the cheongsam is one of the many presentations of cultural dress as an image of exotic eroticism. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that this hyper sexualisation is a part of the western fantasy in perpetuating themes of sexual innocence and submissiveness of non-western cultures (Hall, S. (1992) ;210) which relates to European conventions of conquest of land as historically “allegorized as a woman.” (Hulme, P. (1986)). Non-western women and their sexuality represented through their cultural fashion are hence appropriated as part of a political practice. While the sexualisation of women undoubtedly also exists within western fashion practice, the difference within its offence lies within the loss of agency in the orientalist presentation of women. Through the suppression of a diluted and often inaccurate presentation

of cultural fashion, the west asserts an unauthorised image of the cultural other often through the control over non-western women.

3.2 Cultural Costuming

Similar to the issue of western appropriations of the *cheongsam* through sexualisation and practiced exoticism, presentations of non-western fashion as costumes takes a similar issue of monolithic archetypes to be exploited for western ideals. While the sexualisation is often always dominated through women, the western costuming of the cultural other is non-discriminatory in regard to gender.

In the chapter *Taking Offense: A Discussion of Fashion, Appropriation and Cultural Insensitivity* from the book *The Dangers of Fashion (2020)*, the case study's authors, Denise Nicole Green and Susan B. Kaiser, frame western appropriations of Native American aesthetics and culture through the vessel of the "hippie" social movement. The appropriations of culture within this movement solidified the Native American aesthetics as a costume that would continue to remain as a representation of authentic-living and freedom. *The Summer of love* was a social movement supported largely by young people from "white, middle-classed backgrounds" (Green, D.N., & Kaiser, S.B (2020)) with a "notion that they were reincarnated Indians who returned to the earth with the intention of bringing the land and people back to traditional ways." (D'Allesandro, (2017) ;62). "To symbolize this philosophical reverence, they dressed in fringed buckskin leather and adorned themselves with beads and feathers." (Green, D.N., & Kaiser, S.B (2020)).

These notions of "fringed buckskin leather" and "beads and feathers" as central motifs in generalising and appropriating upon the cultural aesthetics of Native American fashion is a common trope. These reductive patterns are repeatedly practiced as disrespectful representations of Native American costumes in the formation of the production of US national identity (Deloria, 1998). *Media, Myth and Millennials: Critical Perspectives on Race and Culture* presents the example of Coachella, an American musical festival held in California every year, as a spectacle of appropriating Native fashion as a process of identity building within the subculture of Coachella-goers. Similar to *The Summer of Love*, with a majority white demographic of attendees, the authors argue that Coachella's appropriation of native headdress creates a "false spectacle of cultural aesthetic diversity", with the appropriations serving to

“remind many Native Americans and allies of the ways Native American culture is undermined, reproduced and commodified.” (Cordes, A. Merskin, D. (2019) ;192) (Coleman, L.S. & Campbell, C.P. (2019) ;192)

This practice of associations of Native American headdress with festival attire has been reproduced so rampantly that it's appropriated image as costume extends far beyond its initial geography; *T in the Park*, a Scottish music festival, finds festival attendees adorned in feathers and headdress although far detached from the culture of Native America. The social practice of this appropriation affirms the detachment of the practice from cultural sensitivity – that festivalgoers blindly reproduce practices of Native appropriation without consideration to the damage to the community as it has become the social norm.

The Native American Headdress, through the repeated reproduction within festival culture becomes so far detached from its' cultural significance as a collection of feathers to be “presented as symbols of honor and respect” that have to be earned,” (Keene, A. (2010)) and takes on a caricaturised costume as an exclusionary rhetoric for disrespecting cultural heritage and identity.

When fashion becomes archetype delivering a singular presentation with an ethnocentric motive, the appropriation of the fashion becomes extremely damaging and disrespectful. The chosen examples of the western presentations of hypersexualised *cheongsam* and reductive costume of Native American aesthetics contextualise the issues of Eurocentric presentations within modern fashion through popular cultures' hand in proliferating reductive images. The exploitative manner of consuming and perpetuating a monolithic presentation of culture scrubbed of its facets and delivered as a palatable fantasy is a key pillar in recognising these examples as certain practices of appropriation within western fashion.

***Chapter 4: Interpreting Western
appropriations of Southeast Asia***

The scope of this chapter of unethical presentations of Southeast Asian heritage fashion has been chosen as this region's fashions, diverse and historically valuable within trade, have been an under-recognised area of contest within postcolonial studies of fashion. As well as this, as a person of Eurasian descent, this research follows a personal underpinning of interest that observes the history of heritage through the transmission of culture from Southeast Asia to the west.

As a collection of countries, Southeast Asia exists as a locale of brutal histories of colonialism across various Imperial powers. The memory of colonial trade has resulted in an overlap of cultural heritage, motifs and identity found across the region. Two important discussions to be had within this debate of western exploitation of Southeast Asian fashion exists within *batik* (a traditional technique of wax relief onto fabric) and the *sarong* (a multi-functional cloth often patterned with *batik*). Across an exploration of western appropriation of these two case studies, this chapter aims to cohesively narrate the lingering colonial memory of imperialism within fashion to identify how postcolonialism continues to observe fashion through an Orientalist lens.

4. 1 *Batik*

Batik is an ancient craft that is most often cited to originate from Java, Indonesia. Traditionally defined using a canting (a wax pen tool) to illustrate symbolic motifs onto fabric, *batik* is a traditional hand-made craft that journeyed into western fashion through colonial trade. During Dutch colonial rule of Indonesia during the 17th century, trade between the Dutch colonies and Europe quickly recognised a demand for the Indonesian *batik* within international markets. By manufacturing imitation batik at industrial scales, the Dutch produced "specific colors and patterns to suit regional tastes." (Rovine, V. L. (2009) ;48) This dilution and appropriation of the cultural heritage of *batik* through the Dutch conquest of craft was the start of the extractive relationship the West would develop with Southeast Asia over *batik*.

4. 11 *Batik* beyond Southeast Asia

Batik when imitated in modern contexts is very rarely referenced to as *batik*, instead, the patterned fabrics take on terminology dating back its previous colonial extraction as Dutch wax prints. *Batik* offers an interesting study in valuing the difference between the transmissions of culture through the lens of power as presented by the framework offered by *Borrowed Power*:

Essays on Cultural Appropriation (1997) as, while on one hand, the commodification of batik through Dutch trade, where a dominant group (the Dutch) exploits the identity of a subordinate group (the Indonesians), paints a clear image of the appropriation of Indonesian culture, the adoption of Dutch wax prints through trade into Africa during the mid 20th century is not.

This distinction of appropriation, through reference to the framework of *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation (1997)* would place the transformation of Dutch wax prints into Ankara/African wax prints as a form of assimilative cultural transmission. Within this transmission, the Ankara print does not appropriate *batik* but rather evolves and reclaims Ankara prints as a linkage to its own national identity rather than appropriating upon it.

4. 12 The Appropriation of Batik in Modern Western Fashion

Due to *batik's* complex identity, discussions of the appropriation of a cross-cultural craft becomes somewhat convoluted. However, there is a certainty that much like the “predilection” that Simmel discusses in the value of foreign fashions (Simmel, G. (1950)), *batik* on the luxury fashion market remains an exotic fabric that continues to inspire aesthetics without consideration to the careful laborious process and cultural identity sewn into the fabric.

Two case studies offered in the article *Not African? Contested Origins of Wax Print in High-Fashion Appropriation* considers the uses of *batik* aesthetics within Stella McCartney's 2018 spring collection and Dior's 2020 resort collection. These collections highlight the lack of distinction between the two types of cultural prints embodied in western luxury fashion; traditional batik is often hand made with motifs from the natural world, whereas Ankara prints are modern fabrics using colourful designs and vibrant patterns (Jean, N.B. (2014)), digitized with images and portraits. Despite “Dior working with textile designers in Cote d'Ivoire” (Boateng, B (2021)) in the production of the collection, both McCartney's and Dior's collections faced contest over the inspiration of their lines and backlash over the cultural appropriation of African textiles. A response to the charges of appropriation considered the claim that “African fabric... isn't African” (Boateng, B (2021)) but rather a Dutch-mediated Indonesian craft within Africa.



Figure 2 Stella McCartney 2018 Spring Collection via WWD, Figure 3 Dior 2020 Cruise via WWD

This discourse around the appropriation of *batik*/Dutch wax print/African print and who the right to define its appropriation observes an interesting discussion posed in *Who owns Culture?* Author Susan Scafidi questions the protection of cultural products within the fluid and changing boundaries of culture. (Scafidi, S. (2005)) In the context of the cited examples of Stella McCartney and Dior, the framework of Ming Ha-T Pham’s racial plagiarism is an apt perspective in observing these appropriations whereby the inspiration and origin of the appropriation is far less important than the “fact, source and effects of this kind of unauthorized copying.” ((Pham, M.-H.T (2017) ;73)

4. 2 The *Sarong*

The *sarong* is a multi-functional cloth native to Southeast Asia which is traditionally decorated with regional *batik*. The diverse cloths take on versatile roles as “lived garments” (Allerton, C. (2007) ;6), acting as a second skin, they serve the wearer’s needs, honing an “intimate connection to their wearer’s body and bodily substance.” (Allerton, C. (2007) ;6) In Southeast Asia, while Asia has adopted western fashion, the *sarong*’s identity remains part of everyday life as well as national attire.

In the west, the *sarong's* identity has become profoundly perturbed. With a manufactured identity of sexiness, the sarong has become a symbol for beachwear. It no longer observes the facets of function available in its traditional counterpart; the western appropriation of the sarong acts only to exploit through an orientalist and patriarchal lens through fashion.

4. 21 The Sarong Party Girls and Western Fantasy

The idea of the Sarong Party Girl (SPG) emerged as a product of media and other social discourses in disempowering Singaporean and Malaysian women through stereotyping a character of a woman “with little to offer but her youthful beauty and confident sexuality, scant ambition beyond marriage to an ang moh.” (Balasingamchow, Y. M & Koh, A. (2015); 19) The chapter *Dangerous sexuality in Singapore* explores the political backdrop that culminated in this misogynistic view of local women – the arrival of western concepts such as sexual freedom outside marriage contrasted against Singapore’s governmental importance of traditional gender roles in a securing national sense of order after colonialism. This conflation of both western and local critiques of the SPG caricature is reflective of the order of power within fashion and social commentary regardless of culture – that women are the first to be objectified and reduced.

The orientalist view of women bearing the *sarong*, much alike to any foreign traditional fashion, is one steeped in a western domination – a western view of oriental women described the exotic women as being readily available yet submissive. Said’s conception of the *orient* as a series of projections in crafting the western fantasy of dominance is further layered upon by patriarchal values of control over women. (Said, E.W (1978) ;8) While western males praised the SPG for their availability and interest, locals heavily criticised their women – the SPG’s choice of sexual freedom threatened national pride. (Balasingamchow, Y. M & Koh, A. (2015) ;21) The fashion of the “tantalizing” saris, sarongs, and cheongsams were imagined to insight the power of seduction over caucasian men. (Lim, C (1995) ;30) The presented discussions of the two opposing views of women in sarongs highlight that through both an orientalist and patriarchal lens, the construction of women in sarongs is an exploitative and reductive symbol that seeks to control and oppress women.

4. 22 Western Appropriation of the *Sarong* in Fashion

While today the sarong remains, a traditional cloth worn daily, in both every day and religious contexts, (Zein, Z. M. (2021)) due to the application of the social perception of the *SPG* in the West, the *sarong* adopted a highly sexualised image. As well as hyper sexualisation, the sarong adopted another interesting facet of westernisation linked to the sexualisation of the cloth – the conception of a gendered cloth.

While in Southeast Asia, the sarong is a cloth free of gender constraints, 2025 western fashion experienced the emergence of the sarong on men on the *Fashion Week* runways - a fashion choice that found David Beckham previously mocked for in the late 90s. (Cosmopolitan (2023)) This Eurocentric objection of the cultural norm of an appropriated artefact is entirely jarring as it highlights the rejection of traditional usage of the sarong as an opposition to western social beliefs while adopting a cultural aesthetic. In such instance where the sarong on men is viewed as a discretion to western culture, the western image must be viewed as an appropriation of Southeast Asian heritage as it seeks to exploit the fashion in a manner that suits western ideals rather than embracing the non-western practice of the *sarong*.

Additionally, the argument that the innovation and modernisation of the sarong is not the west's to claim exists. When practiced with inauthentic imagery and draping and bound to the constraints of western ideology of gender, the *sarong's* identity is lost to orientalism and is thus, appropriated.

The modernisation of the sarong through authentic practice in line Geczy's theory of transorientalism is presented in the reclaiming of the sarong by Southeast Asian content creator @anthonylavis. Pairing the sarong with modern and western fashion, the sarong's identity is maintained as a cloth that aligns with its wearer's needs while presenting a more modern outlook on the traditional cloth. This presentation of the sarong within modern contexts has stirred international interest, shedding light on authentic material and draping through styling videos and highlighting that there is international interest in maintaining cultural authenticity, accuracy and pride through fashion.



Figure 4 Screenshot of the sarong in modern application by @anthonylavisoin via Instagram

4.3 Concluding notes

To conclude, the journey of *batik* and the *sarong* into modern applications is a discussion that requires historical context in understanding the relation between cultural heritage through fabric and its importance within national identity. When cultural heritage is disrupted through unethical appropriations of culture within western Fashion, as presented in the mediation of Dutch manufacture of *batik* during colonial trade as well as the sexualisation of the Sarong Party Girl caricature, there exists a prevalence of orientalism attached unfairly onto a culture, acting as a reminder that colonialism is maintained within our modern fashion system through an appropriative claim to culture.

Conclusion

To conclude, through the exploration of systemic orders of hierarchy within western fashion, distinctions of appropriations and the exploitation of cultural heritage through popular culture,

this dissertation provides clarity through the lasting postcolonial effects that define the structural order of western fashion. Chapter 4 of this dissertation explores a personal interpretation of the appropriations of *batik* and the *sarong* in modern contexts through the application of postcolonial critiques of cultural aesthetics to analyse the ways appropriations may be ethical or unethical in line with studied frameworks of appropriation.

The discussion of appropriation of fashion is one that will remain a considerable point of dispute as fashion continues to exist within a globalised and digitalised world. As we continue to approach an unprecedented dynamic whereby non-western fashion is consumed on equal footing with western fashion across digital spaces, discourse seeking differentiation between the boundaries of appropriation will be questioned. While this shift of equality of influence between the west and non-west offers to expand influences and appreciation of culture, in the discussions of transorientalism, the commodification of tradition also offers to dilute culture.

As well as issues of commodification within capitalist structures, the undercurrent themes of postcolonial critique of fashion have exposed the presence of orientalism and patriarchal values employed in the system of appropriation of cultural heritage. The recurrent sexualisation of women within fashion highlights fashion's broken system in devaluing women that must seek reform in its practice of representation.

While untangling postcolonialism in its entirety is an impossible task, within this context of fashion this dissertation considers an understanding for why appropriation in reductive practices is harmful to the cultures appropriated upon as well as considers outlines for the ways applications of culture can be recognised as unethical appropriations.

While ethical presentations of cultural aesthetics in fashion exists, the context of who is wearing, and for what intention, is vital in the understanding of the disentanglement of power struggles and dominance within fashion systems.

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