

RECENT THOUGHTS ON HMONG 'TRIBAL' CLOTHING

Vanghoua Anthony Vue / 29 May 2018

In the aftermath of the Royal Wedding, Hmong social media ignited with strong debate over Eponine London's 'tribal' inspired dress, worn by actress and descendent of King Charles II Cressida Bonas. On Eponine London's social media and throughout the news press, this and other similar dresses that uses aspects of Hmong clothing have been described as 'tribal' (since changed to 'Hmong'), 'aztec', 'multi-coloured striped', 'bohemian', 'ancient' and as a 'Northern Thai-style dress'. Some in the Hmong community have expressed outrage (notably Hmong Americans) citing this as cultural appropriation, whereas others have encouraged greater leniency, and have even commended and expressed gratitude to the actress and the designer Jet Shenkman for exposing 'Hmongness' to mainstream media.

Although many culturally and politically aware community members have already voiced their concerns, I have also reflected on and outlined my concerns with this case, which is reflective of other past and current occurrences of cultural appropriation with Hmong art and culture. Shenkman's cultural appropriation is not the first, nor even the most damaging. As an artist myself who works with Hmong art and culture, I too am not innocent, guilty of borrowing Hmong art and culture for purposes in my art that can be seen as appropriation. Through the constant reflection and questioning of my own position in relation to these and other concerns, I hope to better my art and encourage intercultural understanding.

NEW ADDITIONS TO THE TRIBAL COLLECTION

MARCH 28, 2017 · JET SHENKMAN

Every piece in the tribal collection is a one off, totally unique piece. We have a few new additions to the collection which are available to preview now. Please make an appointment by emailing hello@eponinelondon.com



Journal post by Eponine London, March 2017.

'Tribal' and its complications

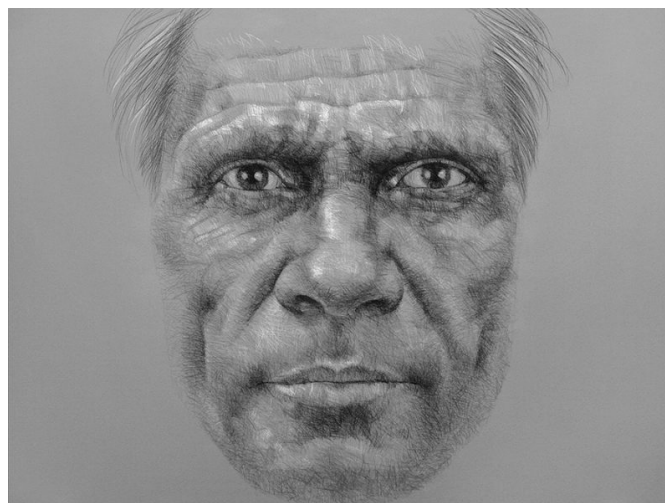
The term and concept 'tribal' is a Western construction. By definition the term may seem objective and inoffensive. However, the term is a historically oppressive term that paints a negative image of those labelled as 'tribal', evoking with it all the connotations of backwardness, savagery, barbarism, and exoticness. Essentially, 'tribal' people are considered as 'less than human'. Such imaginations justified 'tribal' people as targets for colonisation and exploitation, in need of 'saving' and 'civilisation'. The British Empire was one of the leading proponents of such thinking, endeavouring to 'save' the wretched of the Earth—taking, colonising, and exploiting one quarter of the world by the early twentieth century, much of it based on false pretenses concealed under racial superiority and the White man's burden. Colonisation continues to affect much of the world today, psychologically as much as geographically, culturally, economically, and politically.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the designer (originally from Holland) is currently based in Britain, the actress who wore the dress is British, and of all occasion—worn at a British Royal Wedding. Although the British are not alone in defining others in such terms, they have been one of the foremost perpetrators of subjugation through their 'knowledge' and control over others. Many European powers have over the course of the past couple of centuries studied and collected 'dying' and 'tribal' cultures, defining them as 'ancient', 'undeveloped', and frozen in time, open to free usage. In Australia, the consequences of British colonisation have resulted in the near genocide of our First Australians, their loss of land and the degradation of their culture. Such colonial thinking continues to taint mainstream perspectives of them as unfit and unworthy in contemporary society.

Contrary to the connotations perpetrated by the term 'tribal', Hmong people have never been any of these, nor many indigenous groups who have been categorised, defined, and labelled as such. Hmong people have always been a living and breathing culture, developing a culture and identity along its own trajectory outside those of Western or other non-Western timelines of 'progression'. By ignoring the connotations and historical implications of this terminology, and by continuing to use this as a label for people and their cultures is to further compound notions of inherent racial inferiority.

Homogenisation under the nation-state

For Hmong culture to be defined under 'Thai' nationality is to disregard those who have and continue to struggle within the Thai state based on their ethnicity. Thailand consists of a multiplicity of ethnic minorities, many who struggle with the loss of language, culture, religion, and identity brought about by the enforcement of Thai nationality through soft and hard power. To homogenise their cultures and identity under the term 'Thai' is to ignore the negative impacts of *Thaification*—by which the dominant central Thais assimilate ethnic minorities.



Vernon Ah Kee, *George Sibley*, 2008, acrylic, charcoal and crayon on canvas, 180 x 240cm. Drawings from the Tindale collection to humanise Aboriginal Australians in contrast to their scientific portrayal in anthropological records.



Tony Albert, *Headhunter*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint and vintage Aboriginal ephemera. Reworking kitsch representations of Aboriginal Australians to challenge the stereotypes they perpetrate.



Hmong men playing the qeej. Photo: *Among the Tribes in South-West China* by Samuel R Clarke.



Kitsch souvenirs, Chiang Mai.
Photo: the author.



Graham Fletcher, from the *Lounge Room Tribalism* series exploring the critical legacy of European tradition of housing collections of Oceania and African tribal art in domestic modernist settings.



Kitsch postcards of ethnic minorities, Chiang Mai. Photo: the author.

Ethnic minorities in many nation-states continue to be subjugated to racist stereotypes that leave unjust social, economic and political consequences on their lives. Hmong people, for one, have been looked down upon in the past and presently in Thailand, in other homes in Asia and across the world. One needs to only recall the 2015 controversy sparked by Thai band member Somkiat Savarat, who claimed on state television that Hmong people “never washed their clothes” and “never took baths”, prompting one of the hosts to respond with laughter and add further insult regarding the smell of Hmong clothing. Never mind that the band members were wearing Hmong clothes because they were ‘inspired’ by the lifestyle of Hmong people.

The consequences of ethnic discrimination filtrates through to government policy and social interaction, leading to poverty and social marginalisation. Economic desperation is one reason why ethnic groups such as the Hmong have resorted to over-commodifying their culture for the market, with many adapting Hmong clothing into kitsch tourist products. Other forms of exploitation for economic gains, including mass production by both Hmong and non-Hmong, perpetuate a vicious cycle that has devalued Hmong clothing.

Ethnic groups such as the Hmong remain in fragile and marginal positions within Thailand and other nation-states, with the exploitation of their culture and identity a desperate means to economic survival for some. When it comes to homogenising Hmong identity with the identity of the nation-state, it seems this is only afforded when this representation is seen to positively promote and boost nationalism and the agendas of those in the majority, mostly portraying them as exotic, happy and contempt ethnic minorities and ‘hilltribes’. At other times, the identity of ethnic minorities is all too often ignored, undervalued, disrespected, and considered as detrimental.

Obscuring Hmong visibility

Forms of visibility that ignore Hmong voices and Hmong presence is detrimental to Hmong representation, and only contributes further harm to Hmong identity in the long term, encouraging the use of Hmong culture and art in ways that continue to erase Hmong people from their very story. This is especially pertinent when it comes to Hmong clothing and the representation of Hmong women—who by and far, have been afforded the least in terms of voice and acknowledgement, even though Hmong clothing is primarily based on the intergenerational knowledge and labour of Hmong women.

Because of the underrepresentation and visibility that Hmong people have on a global scale, when Hmong is seen, this representation needs to be created by those within the community. There is no shortage of such voices and representations, with many who continue to go unnoticed in their daily efforts to be seen and heard. Such representations generated by others appropriating Hmong culture can only

offer shallow understandings of Hmong people and their experience, further promoting the invisibility, muteness, and subordination of Hmong people, suffocating and diminishing the already limited spaces available.

Visibility for the sake of visibility is not sufficient, let alone something to be grateful and thankful for when others 'represent' Hmong. No visibility at all is better than visibility that continues to perpetuate uneven power relations, the status quo, and the invisibility of Hmong people for the benefit of those whose stark visibility is already more than blinding.

Threading between cultural appropriation and appreciation

Cultural borrowing has occurred throughout much of the world for centuries, but cultural borrowing as seen by Shenkman and others are problematic because of the clear imbalance in social, economic, and political power between her as the borrower and the culture from which she borrows. The ownership she claims over Hmong culture positions her in a dominant position of power that overrides the creators of the art and culture. Hmong presence, knowledge and labour are lost amidst the privileged afforded to those in more dominant positions.

Although cultures borrow and take from each other, there is a distinction when a minority culture borrows or adopts aspects of a majority culture. This act does not impact the majority culture in ways that occur when a majority culture adopts those of a minority and underprivileged culture. The latter working to reinforce historically exploitative relationships and inequalities.

A Hmong person borrowing British designs for a dress does not override British ownership and visibility as much as the opposite scenario. For most of the world who see the image of Bonas in the one piece, the thought of Hmong people would not spring to mind (hence all the wrongful descriptions in the news press)—this invisibility is evidence of a critical imbalance. Lack of awareness does not justify this invisibility. The brand 'Eponine London' is endorsed at the expense of an art form that goes largely unnoticed and undervalued from the hands of Hmong grandmothers, mothers and sisters, many who resort to bargaining with consumers at values well below their worth in flea markets across Asia.

Additionally, the significance of Hmong clothing has been taken *out of context* in this and many other cultural appropriations of Hmong clothing. Hmong clothing have significant social, cultural, religious and spiritual functions that cannot be simply disregarded for the sake of aesthetics. Here, the difference between cultural appropriation and appreciation may be most apparent. The appreciation of culture is at work when that involves the appreciation of a culture within relevant contexts, moulded by those within the culture, not through deformed iterations that exists outside

of this. The appreciation of Hmong clothing is perhaps best seen when others participate in the making and wearing of Hmong clothing through processes that align with the making and wearing of Hmong clothing. Importantly, the labour and knowledge of Hmong women are so intricately interwoven and stitched into these clothing that their presence cannot be extracted, unstitched and unstrung. The flesh and bones of Hmong bodies are also integral to these clothing as the colours, symbols, materials, and processes used and cannot be simply skinned off these fabrics. For Hmong clothing, there is no thin line of separation, but rather, a thick unyielding thread that distinguishes between cultural appropriation and appreciation.



Karla Kloss wearing a Native American-inspired headdress in 2012.



Mass produced and imported boomerang souvenirs, Kuranda.
Photo: the author



View of a store front in Chiang Rai. Photo: the author.



Top: Market where ethnic minorities sell textile goods, Sapa, Vietnam. Bottom left: Goods sold by Black Hmong in Sapa. Bottom right: Black Hmong women selling in Sapa. Photos: the author.

Final thoughts

There is a history of marginalisation and oppression that comes from the making and wearing of Hmong clothing—it is stained and soaked with the blood of those who have fought valiantly in the past just so that their descendants can continue to be clothed and identified as Hmong. Lives have been lost, land forcibly taken, culture and identity tarnished. There is only so much that can be taken from a people before they demand and are owed due respect and acknowledgement.

Although Hmong clothing carry the weight of this traumatic history, these clothing are also reflective of a people who remain resilient despite the pain and suffering that they have endured and withstood. Can those who appropriate our culture carry such pain with us? Can they face the discrimination and marginalisation that we have faced? Bled the blood we have bled and shed the tears we have cried? Do they lament the loss of those beloved homes we have been forced to migrate from over centuries of encroachment by those who deemed us as unworthy of taking up such space? Can they remain proud, standing and resilient when others wrongfully look down on us as ‘undeveloped primitives’ who’s unwashed dirty clothes stench of filth? Or is the appropriation of one’s ‘tribal’ culture and art simply for a quick buck, worn today to appease and dazzle ‘royalty’ and the masses, only to be replaced and forgotten by the next ‘tribal’ trend taken from another ‘ancient’ culture tomorrow?