

Celebrating Our Native American Community Respectfully

By Amy-Lyons Ketchum

We often hear from some people that the adoption of certain symbols, styles of dress, or practices associated with a cultural group is not meant to offend or disparage the people that originated these cultural artifacts but instead to celebrate or honor them. In reality, the result is often the opposite of feeling honored and respected. The disconnect between intent and impact in microaggressions is significant. How can we show true appreciation to our students, co-workers, friends, and neighbors whose cultures are so often misappropriated?

It happens every year. Someone decides to wear a headdress to a Halloween party (or a concert... or a photo shoot... etc.). Once it was a celebrity. Another time it was a Social Media influencer. A few years ago, a politician's child even jumped on the bandwagon. In elementary school we made construction paper headdresses to wear on Thanksgiving. Therefore, it's not surprising that people in Oklahoma might wear a headdress for fashion. Some may say "What's the big deal?", "It doesn't hurt anybody!" (intent)... but it is ultimately hurtful to our wider Native community (impact).

The "My Culture is Not a Costume" campaign creates awareness on social media that traditional cultural attire is not an appropriate costume for Halloween. Native American themed costumes oversexualize Indigenous women target [a population with higher rates of sexual assault and murder](#). These costumes also perpetuate negative stereotypes and cultural misinformation. In fact, not all tribes wear headdresses. In many instances, women don't wear them at all.

Headdresses are given to people who have made significant contributions to the tribe. Someone might think they look cute in an 'Indian princess' costume (intent), but they actually look uninformed and insensitive (impact).

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How do we show our appreciation without crossing the line of appropriation?

If you're unsure if wearing something would be offensive, it is best to ask someone from that culture. Every tribe has their own ideas about what is and is not appropriate for outsiders. Don't assume that someone who is Choctaw would know about something that is Comanche or Salish or Kickapoo. Learning about different cultures is the first step towards cultural appreciation. If you are still unsure, wait until you have more information. I enjoy wearing the beaded jewelry I've bought from Native artists, but I'm uncomfortable wearing a ribbon skirt or similar regalia. Wearing something culturally significant in an appropriate setting with approval (intent) would make me feel confident that I was not appropriating someone's culture (impact).

[Indigenous Peoples Day](#) is celebrated in Norman and across the United States on Monday, October 11, 2021. November is designated [Native American Heritage Month](#).

Organizations across the country will offer educational materials, create awareness through social media, and present programming highlighting Native American culture. However, some groups choose not to celebrate during November because of the association with Thanksgiving. For example, on the Norman campus, Native American Heritage Month is observed in April to correspond with other culturally significant events like the [Oklahoma Native American Language Fair](#) and the [Spring Pow Wow](#).

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It's important to recognize Native American culture beyond November and to ask our Indigenous friends about their thoughts on Thanksgiving and cultural heritage celebrations.

If we listen without making assumptions or judgements (intent) to our Indigenous neighbors, they will feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and opinions openly (impact).

You can also appreciate culture by showing financial support to Native artists and businesses. Contribute to Native causes like [The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's fund](#).

Take the time to learn about the Native [communities](#), [languages](#), and [cultures](#) still thriving in Oklahoma and [across the United States](#).

Recognize that our nation's history is complicated and Native Americans have [contributed so much](#) to the United States while simultaneously [losing so much](#).

Have fun on Halloween. Enjoy Thanksgiving with your friends and family.

Just remember that these holidays can be stressful for people who are constantly told "Get over it", "You're too sensitive", or "It's honoring you". By more closely considering the intent of our words and actions, we can make a better impact on the world.