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Research report

Forum: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Issue: Protecting the cultural practices of refugee communities to combat cultural appropriation.

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Introduction

We reside in a world where over 123 million people have been forcibly displaced from the locations which they call home, including almost 43 million refugees around the globe (UNHCR, 2024). Unfortunately, fleeing one's home comes with a detrimental cost – the languages, traditions, artefacts, and other culturally significant articles are usually left behind during migration. Refugee identities can gradually erode over time, especially when the main priority is for them to get by in an increasingly unforgiving world.

Displaced populations are often treated as inferiors, especially with the 'refugee' label being plastered onto them almost instantly as they seek shelter elsewhere. As they desperately apply for legal residence in other nations, one of their main priorities becomes assimilation – for identity is almost always associated with one's place of residence or origin (Burnett, 2013). In this process, their original cultural identities are often left behind, evolving into little more than a shell of their former vibrance.

Even after they proceed to another nation, this 'refugee' label poses a significant hurdle for their day-to-day lifestyle. Others often look down on refugees and their practices, with this mindset rendering itself a conspicuous threat to their economic and social stability. Amidst all this chaos and the struggle of not only physical but cultural and political resettlements, little consideration is allocated towards the refugees' cultural identity - an identity vulnerable to unfavourable erosion.

This vulnerability paves the way for exploitation. As is the case with most power imbalances, the less fortunate are often exploited and typically lack the legal and economic tools to retaliate against these threats. Many of us in the developed world often witness cultural appropriation taking place without even noticing it or realising that it is in fact responsible for this pressing issue at hand. Major brands like Adidas and Dior, alongside even practices as simple as Halloween costumes, involve cultural appropriation to a considerable extent (deBara & Berlinsky-Schine, 2025).

Cultural appropriation indubitably directly disrespects marginalised communities and undermines the values and traditions which they stand for. When the vulnerable cultural practices of refugees are included in the mix, the issue becomes even more prominent and lays grounds for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to step in, working towards a peaceful path to cultural justice for all refugees, especially those who are victims of cultural appropriation.



"Blackface" is a controversial makeup deemed to be culturally appropriating.

This report will examine the causes and detrimental effects of cultural appropriation, especially on refugees. It shall also familiarise delegates with key events, sources, and terms which are relevant for the conference.

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Definitions of key terms

Refugee

An individual who has been forced to flee their country due to reasons such as war, persecution, violence, or climate change, and hence are unable to return to such country due to an induced fear of threats, including but not limited to the aforementioned examples (UNHCR, 2024).

Cultural appropriation

The nonconsensual adoption or portrayal of a culturally significant article or practice belonging to a minority social group in a stereotypical, unethical, and exploitative manner by a more dominant social group, typically observed in fields such as entertainment and fashion.

Cultural appreciation

The mindful, respectful interaction between two parties of different cultures regarding cultural topics, typically due to interest piques and a desire to learn and connect with such without any intent to defame or exploit them.

Heritage

The intellectual and tangible legacy of a specific culture, including but not limited to traditions, languages, music, dances, and food.

Intercultural dialogue

An interaction which allows for the open and mindful exchange between parties from different cultures and backgrounds, often laying grounds for cultural appreciation to take place.

Intellectual Property (IP) rights

A framework of legally protected rights, often inaccessible to marginalised refugee communities, which are granted to parties over intangible material, such as knowledge and expressions, including unique cultural traditions.

Cultural preservation

A deliberate effort with the intent to safeguard and pass on culturally significant articles and practices, especially in the light of threats to heritage such as mass displacement or assimilation pressures.

Assimilation

A process through which individuals of varying cultures absorb the culture and customs of a dominant social group within a country, often required to a certain degree as a prerequisite of citizenship applications.

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Traditional knowledge (TK)

The information and knowledge passed down traditionally in indigenous communities.

Sui Generis (unique) protection

A unique, growing approach which can be applied to safeguard indigenous culture and practices, going beyond standard Intellectual Property laws to address the collective nature of such community-based practices, cultural articles, and Traditional Knowledge (TK).

General overview

As of 2024, the number of refugees has been ever-growing amidst global turmoil such as skyrocketing political tension, the onset and continuation of several deadly wars, and the looming threat of climate change exacerbated by the spiralling industrial presence on the planet (UNHCR, 2024). Due to this, the main priority for global assistance is directed towards basic human needs such as food, water, and shelter, with little regard for the protection of refugees' cultural identities and heritage.

Marginalisation & Cultural Alienation

The cultural identities of refugees, including practices such as dance, storytelling, and rituals alongside articles like traditional medicine and food, are integral to the heritage and tradition upheld by populations of displaced people, especially those who have been forced to flee past the borders of their country of origin (Lee, 2025). These cohesive identities are typically forged over millennia of practice and are a key part of the culture's dignity, hence making it all the more important for the UNHCR to protect them and strive for their preservation.

However, many refugee groups are left vulnerable and are often marginalised, especially in the settings of host countries, camps, or families, all of which are generally part of the wider dominant culture in the recipient country. For example, Bhutanese refugees in the United States of America may feel overwhelmed by the dominant American culture and may be pressured to



"The Forced Assimilation of Native Americans"

assimilate, compromising their traditional culture and heritage in the process. According to a study by Cambridge University, the suicide rate among Bhutanese refugees in the United States has been exacerbated, with a key catalyst for this being the lack of culturally relevant programmes and initiatives available to them, further isolating this vulnerable group in a foreign nation (Brown et al., 2018).

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The issue of cultural alienation and the pressure to assimilate does not just affect these Bhutanese refugees. It's a worldwide issue, plaguing refugees of varying origins albeit in a similar way. This issue is often exacerbated if the original culture of the refugees greatly differs from the recipient country's culture, which are generally Western ideals. Take for example Somali refugees in the United States and Europe, where individuals devote all their attention towards assimilation efforts such as mastering the host country's language (Bentley & Owens, 2008). This process undermines the original cultural identities and heritage of such refugees, with cultural dilution taking place as they assimilate into host cultures and lose access to traditional practices, contacts, education, and knowledge.

Cultural Appropriation

Amidst this vulnerability and the already weakening ties between refugees and their original cultures, a new opportunity arises for parties of higher powers, such as corporations, media outlets, and sometimes even the general public. In particular, cultural appropriation – the nonconsensual, inaccurate portrayal of marginalised cultures' practices and traditions – has been growing at a steady rate proportional to globalisation (Sosa, 2019). In many modern capitalist societies, refugee practices are often commercialised. For example, the traditional Palestinian art of Tatrez appears in fashion collections or displays often without any accompanying credit or economic reparations to its origin whatsoever (Ghnaim, 2024).



Cultural appropriation of Tatrez.

Additionally, outdated and ineffective legal frameworks further exacerbate the growing problem. Whilst the 1951 Refugee Convention established in Geneva legally defines a refugee and outlines their civil and political rights, it does not explicitly safeguard their cultural rights, intellectual property (IP), or traditional knowledge (TK) (UNHCR, n.d.). Meanwhile, although the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage encourages cultural protection, especially that of intangible articles, it lacks power to enforce this and carry out actions to do so in refugee contexts, further calling for the UNHCR to step in.

Conclusion

While refugee parties try to independently preserve their cultural heritages, it is simply not enough for these traditions to be used in a proper manner in a land completely oblivious to the origins and significance of these articles. It is imperative that the global community steps in, with the UNHCR at the forefront during this conference, to mitigate cultural appropriation and rather convert it to cultural appreciation, the latter of which is beneficial to the collective global community.

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Major parties involved

Refugee Communities & Countries of Origin

Refugee communities, regardless of their location or origin, are the stewards of rich cultural heritage who are facing displacement, marginalisation, and/or exploitation as part of cultural appropriation. They are the primary victims of cultural appropriation and are highly vulnerable to this problem given their status as refugees and the pressure to assimilate into their host culture. Their countries of origin, like Mexico, may sometimes demand repatriation due to this issue.

Host Governments

Many national governments, especially of nations which are hosts to refugees (e.g. U.S.A., U.K., Canada) are capable of and have implemented domestic policies which encourage refugees and immigrants to maintain their cultural heritage, supporting it as part of a nationwide initiative to make the country more inclusive and diverse (Government of Canada, 2024). Governments can invest in integration courses and municipal initiatives to support a proper understanding of refugees' cultures. While these bodies have the power to eradicate cultural appropriation for the most part, they do not see it as a top priority for refugees.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

As outlined in its core values, the UNHCR is mandated to safeguard refugee rights, including the access to proper cultural expression and the accurate depiction of refugee cultures for appropriate purposes (UNHCR, n.d.). While the UNHCR takes significant efforts to promote refugee inclusion in host societies, combatting cultural appropriation targetting refugees is not a priority for them at the moment. If it does, however, it could make a significant impact mitigating the issue.

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

While UNESCO has created and oversees the 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage and devotes close attention to the cultural aspects of marginalised groups, it does not have sufficient enforcement powers or the ability to make much of a difference in the context of refugees, let alone cultural appropriation targetting them.

Corporations & Fashion Brands

Corporations and fashion brands are the primary culprits responsible for cultural appropriation by promoting fragile cultural articles as 'trendy' or 'diverse' in the wrong manners. This can even happen unintentionally, as seen in one of Pepsi's 2017 commercials amidst the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, although most appropriation is used as a marketing tool and to

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maximise profits (DeChard, n.d.). It can also be used to give consumers a false sense of diversity and cultural appreciation to boost the brand's reputation.

Academia & Cultural Institutions

People at these institutions, including researchers, anthropologists, and historians, can document and elevate refugee heritage, preserving facts about it and safeguarding how cultural practices were originally meant to be used. Installations such as museum exhibits and cultural open days can be used to educate the general public on how certain aspects of refugee cultures can and cannot be used, working towards cultural appreciation rather than appropriation.

The General Public

The general public is the primary consumer of content that appropriates refugee culture, often unknowingly. Their purchases of culturally appropriating articles from the aforementioned corporations and fashion brands drive the latter to produce more and encourage them to further appropriate vulnerable cultures. Corporations will often change their marketing strategies based on trends amongst their consumers.

Civil Society Organisations

Civil society organisations, such as Australia's Refugee Council and the USA's Karam Foundation, can be at the forefront of cultural appreciation and protection (Refugee Council of Australia, 2019). They undertake initiatives such as teaching mother tongues, running storytelling workshops, and documenting endangered cultural traditions. They can and do work together with academia and cultural institutions to raise awareness about dying cultural traditions, including those of refugees.

Timeline of Key Events

14 Dec 1950	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is established, following post-WWII mass displacement in Europe.
28 Jul 1951	The 1951 Refugee Convention is adopted by the United Nations, laying the basic framework for refugee rights, primarily legal and political with little regards to cultural preservation or appropriation.
1960s	Decolonisation in Africa leads to widespread refugee movements, increasing UNHCR's relevance outside of Europe.

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1970s – 1990s	Several major refugee crises occur, such as the migration of Vietnamese ‘Boat People’ in the 1980s to Western nations. Many cultural articles are inappropriately adopted without consent in host countries, often generalised and marketed (UEH News, 2023).
30 Sep 2002	The World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) discussed one of the first documents outlining the concept of Sui Generis cultural protection, kickstarting the ongoing development of Sui Generis systems for cultural protection.
17 Oct 2003	UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention enters into force, aimed at preserving intangible aspects of cultural elements under the basic framework of human rights.
2014	Taylor Swift’s “Shake it Off” music video sparks internet outrage after it allegedly exacerbated and mocked black stereotypes.
13 May 2021	Mexico accuses fashion brands Zara, Anthropologie, and Patowl of cultural appropriation, claiming that they used Mexican indigenous designs without proper permission. The nation also demanded them to provide reparations to the original inventors (Hills, 2021).
2025	Israeli designers appropriate traditional Palestinian tatreez embroidery, without crediting its origin whatsoever. This sparks outrage among institutes like ‘Tatreez and Tea’ (Alwa’l, 2025).
Ongoing	Cultural appropriation, including that of refugees, by brands and corporations still continues in the present day in spite of a lack of significant counteraction. Most appropriation instances are unbeknownst and are passive to the general public, although they are the main audience.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Although the problem of cultural appropriation amongst refugees has grown increasingly pressing in today’s day and age, the previous attempts to tackle this issue have been limited and ineffective, merely acting as ‘suggestions’ rather than actually obligating anyone to take action. However, the fact that awareness of this problem exists is prevalent among those who can act is a key step towards resolving the issue once and for all. Some attempts have laid the groundwork for other solutions which delegates may propose during the conference.

1. Legal initiatives by the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO)

WIPO has undertaken several key steps acknowledging the intellectual property rights behind ancient cultural traditions after the mass migrations of refugees in the 1960s and 1970s. It has established treaties and guidelines, such as the Model Provisions for National Laws on the

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Protection of Expressions of Folklore Against Illicit Exploitation and Other Prejudicial Actions (WIPO, n.d.). It was integral to developing a Sui Generis legal framework to acknowledge and protect the unique nature of cultural rights. Although these initiatives were a fundamental step, they were not binding and had inconsistent adoption across states, limiting its effect.

2. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

Entering into force on April 20th of 2006, the UNESCO ICH Convention was a pivotal move in combatting the misuse of cultural aspects and traditions, including those belonging to refugee communities. Under the UNESCO principles, it laid grounds for the identification and documentation of intangible cultural heritage, as outlined in its name (UNESCO, n.d.). However, this convention focuses more on cultural vitality and safeguarding rather than intellectual property rights or measures against cultural appropriation on a commercial scale.

3. Efforts by museums and other academia institutions

Many museums and similar academia institutions in this day and age aim to not only educate but also to foster cultural appreciation, simultaneously making progress towards eradicating cultural appropriation by educating the general public on what culturally significant articles and practices are actually used for (Huff, 2022). This increases their awareness of what constitutes appropriation of a certain culture and what does not. These institutions do a great job at educating



A museum exhibit featuring indigenous designs.

others in a generally straightforward, honest manner backed by professionals like researchers and curators, and sometimes even engagement with source communities. However, they often are unable to reach the target audience, especially in a time where museum visitation is dwindling amidst the new generation. Entrances to these physical institutions also present barriers, like admission fees and geographical location, which can hinder one's ability to visit.

Possible solutions

The imposition of potential solutions considering this topic has to be carefully debated and pondered in the conference before taking place, especially in lieu of the consequences they could present. Each solution has its own pros and cons which must be weighed with heavy consideration and pragmatism. Of course, more solutions can also be proposed by the committee.

One potential solution could be to **increase public education and engagement with regards to specific cultural practices or artefacts**, especially those belonging to refugee communities and are at high risk of appropriation. Public education can take place in a diverse

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variety of manners, ranging from temporary museum exhibits to government-led campaigns. However, when considering this solution, we need to keep in mind the accessibility of these education initiatives and try to mitigate the barriers associated with such – for example through making museum exhibits free to the public.

Another solution could be to **further develop existing Sui Generis protection frameworks**, especially in the context of protecting refugee cultures from appropriation. This can be done in collaboration with bodies such as UNESCO and WIPO. Further measures can also be taken to encourage host nations to adopt policies that combat appropriation, such as monetary incentives.

Furthermore, the committee could consider **fining corporations, entities, or individuals responsible for cultural appropriation incidents** to discourage big businesses from resorting to cultural appropriation to maximise profits and marketing. However, some key considerations must be taken into account prior to its introduction. This includes what cultural appropriation is defined by in the context of businesses and who determines if a certain action is cultural appropriation or not.

Further reading

Delegates may refer to the material below to gain more expertise regarding the topic at hand.

- [The CIA world factbook](#) is an excellent resource for delegates to research about their specific nation in general. It is recommended that delegates look through their country's page before diving into the details of the issue at hand.
- [The UNESCO database of National Cultural Heritage Laws](#), which records all heritage-related laws of Member States. Delegates are encouraged to glance through the laws of their country in this database to understand how much it has done to safeguard culture.
- [This journal article](#) delves into the definitions & differences between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation alongside consumer involvement.
- [This research paper](#) examines cultural appropriation in popular media with a focus on marginalised groups, ideal for the issue to be debated.
- [This WIPO database relating to the distribution of TCEs](#) provides examples of guides, agreements, and licences pertaining to the topic. Delegates may use these clauses as model examples when creating their own for an MUN resolution.

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