# A UN Committee Is Considering Making Cultural Appropriation Illegal Worldwide

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By: Katherine Timpf

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Indigenous activists from all around the world are calling on a United Nations committee to make cultural appropriation a criminal offense.

The 189-delegate committee, which is a subset of the UN’s World Intellectual Property Organization, has been in Geneva this week working on a task that it began in 2001: Creating international regulations would ban people from “stealing” indigenous art, dance, and medicine.

Now, it’s important to emphasize that these advocates are not simply asking the UN to issue a statement calling out cultural appropriation as harmful; they actually want to implement laws and institute enforcement mechanisms to punish it as a criminal offense. As reported by CBC News, James Anaya, the dean of law at the University Colorado, spoke to the committee on Monday and demanded that the final document “obligate states to create effective criminal and civil enforcement procedures to recognize and prevent the non-consensual taking and illegitimate possession, sale and export of traditional cultural expressions.”

This is, of course, incredibly stupid. Almost everything in the world has been called “cultural appropriation” by now, and it would be hard to think of a single person who might not end up inadvertently violating one of these laws. Yes, to be fair, the people advocating for them likely just want to penalize the big business who “steal” other culture’s traditions to make money — for example, Anaya pointed out Urban Outfitters selling “Navajo hipster panties” — but everything from being a white girl who wears hoop earrings to styling your eyebrows in a certain way has been deemed “cultural appropriation” at this point. I’m a white girl wearing hoop earrings right now. Should I get a ticket? Maybe go to jail? Or would the laws only apply to sales? What if my life got a little tough, and I sold my hoop earrings online for a little extra cash? Then would I be a violator? And who would get to decide?

The “hoop earrings” issue brings up another point. Usually, when social-justice types bring up hoop earrings, they talk about them as belonging to black and Hispanic women today — which is why white chicks like me can’t wear them. In reality, though, hoop earrings actually go much further back, to ancient times — which brings me to the larger issue: We as humans have been around for awhile at this point. So long in fact, that almost everything has some root in “ancient times”; it would be very tough to think of even one modern “original” idea that cannot be traced back to inspiration from another culture. Should we really be placing blanket criminal restrictions on innovation?

The answer is: Nope, nope, and nope. Am I saying that anything that has been called “cultural appropriation” is always okay and great? No, but social pressure is already providing pretty extreme levels “enforcement” when it comes to this issue (see the burrito shop in Portland that just had to close after social-justice activists outed it for having white owners) and adding criminal punishments to the already strict social punishments for offenders would be a disaster for any society that hopes to advance the future by building on the past.