

PIP Title: Consumer Occulture

PIP Research Question/Statement: An investigation into Neo-Paganism's embrace of Consumerist values and the subsequent implications for diverse cultural identities.

Extract Section: Central Material- Chapter 3: A cross-cultural analysis of the impacts of Appropriation on dominant and non-dominant cultures

* *Please note: extract footnote numbers vary from the original due to formatting.*

Central Material- Chapter 3 Extract

Despite Neo-Paganism's attempts to promote social justice in its philosophy, the Consumerism within the belief system actively contributes to a Neo-Colonial environment, creating power inequalities between cross-cultural groups. Interviewee Dr. Shameem Black highlights the discrepancies in social and economic power; the commodified practices of non-dominant cultures are desired for their spiritual value, and thereby the economic relationship between custom and Neo-Pagan consumer is given power, whilst the non-dominant culture is "*subject to discrimination, racism, exclusion, or worse.*"¹ Black then expands on this and identifies the relationship as a form of Neo-Colonialism.² Kwame Nkrumah's Theory of Neo-Colonialism,³ while a macro-level focused theory involved with international relationships, can be applied on a micro-level to instances of cultural and spiritual appropriation. In the context of appropriation, non-dominant cultures, under the facade of equality and cultural diffusion, are exploited for cultural and spiritual resources by businesses that have arisen to satisfy Neo-Pagan market demand. As hypothesised, cultural integrity is lost, the continuity of tradition is damaged, and power inequalities between cross-cultural groups are emphasised.⁴ Within the questionnaire, of the 57% of respondents who defined cultural appropriation as negative or complicated, 41% expanded by determining that appropriation exploits the cultural identities of non-dominant cultures.⁵ Dr. Guy Redden corroborates the questionnaire responses, as well as Nkrumah's theory of Neo-Colonialism; "*people have survived Colonialism meaning the importance of culture as a source of their identity is vital, and spiritual consumers who [participate] in unauthorised ways reproduce colonial culture.*"⁶ Neo-Pagans of the dominant culture will subconsciously benefit from the power inequalities constructed as a result of Neo-

¹ Primary Research: Interview with Dr. Shameem Black

² Primary Research: Interview with Dr. Shameem Black

³ Nkrumah outlines Neo-Colonialism as the perception of a nation having free control and power over its institutions and populations, while actually being controlled economically and politically by a dominant outsider force. (Nkrumah, K. (1965). *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. International Publishers.)

⁴ Gottlieb, (2017)

⁵ Primary Research: Questionnaire

⁶ Primary Research: Interview with Dr. Guy Redden

Colonialism, as non-dominant cultures are exploited in the market for Neo-Pagan gain.⁷ Therefore, the Neo-Pagan consumer demand reinforces a Neo-Colonial environment in contemporary society, creating power inequalities that disadvantage non-dominant cultures.

Neo-Pagans gain power from the cultural appropriation of non-dominant cultures, allowing them to construct identities as desired. Bourdieu's Cultural Capital theory describes the role of 'Cultural Capital'⁸ and having social status within a culture in giving a person power and influence.⁹ Centuries of Colonialism and power inequalities have forced non-dominant cultures to assimilate to the dominant, compelling persons to perceive the dominant culture as the 'default' in society, and therefore lacking a 'unique culture' that will provide Cultural Capital.¹⁰ As a significant proportion of Neo-Pagans are from the dominant culture,¹¹ they may be enticed to engage in the customs of non-dominant cultures to gain the capital they perceive they lack. Likewise, interviewee Dr. Shameem Black identifies that, when appropriating, dominant cultures may "*experience a sense of liberation*" in being able to control their spiritual practices.¹² Neo-Paganism, therefore, represents an ideal environment for dominant cultures to gain power by 'shopping' for spiritual practices and also reinforcing power inequalities through the appropriation of non-dominant cultures. Furthermore, appropriating cultural and spiritual practices can be perceived as an attempt to identify with the non-dominant culture, as a questionnaire respondent highlights; "*[Neo-Pagans] want to build a connection by having the same practices, however, they do not experience the same inequalities and lack of power that the community does*".¹³ It is this attempt at identification, while still maintaining the privilege of dominant cultures, that degrades non-dominant cultural identities, and, as mentioned, perpetuates Neo-Colonialism. Moreover, by taking practices from continuous and collectively united cultures, Neo-Pagans gain a stronger sense of identity by validating their spirituality with practices that have remained a continuity over time. Miller emphasises the importance of authenticity in Neo-Paganism in developing collective identity,¹⁴ and Williams supports this, stating that Neo-Pagans "*tend to value the old and ancient as a way to validate*

⁷ Chang, J., Malhotra, R., Red Star, W., Vartanian, H. (2020). Racial Capitalism: Who Benefits from Cultural Appropriation?. Presentation.

⁸ Cultural Capital is having cultural goods, behaviours, customs and qualifications that give a person power in society

⁹ Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson, Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (pp. 241-258). Greenwood Press.

¹⁰ Azimy, R. (2020). "White People Have No Culture". Medium. Retrieved 6 July 2022, from <https://medium.com/illumination/white-people-have-no-culture-f9f8edd30533>.

¹¹ Charbonneau, (2007), as cited in Gottlieb, (2017)

¹² Primary Research: Interview with Dr. Shameem Black

¹³ Primary Research: Questionnaire

¹⁴ Miller, C. (2022). Sephora's Starter Witch Kit: Identity Construction through Social Media Protests of Commodified Religion. *Nova Religio*, 25(3), 87-112. <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2022.25.3.87>

*their belief system,*¹⁵ and Indigenous cultures in particular, which are perceived as “*never having lost [the connection to nature]*”¹⁶ are viewed as ‘authentic’. This is further affirmed by interviewee Dr. Guy Redden who adds “*Indigenous cultures comes to stand for an authentic alternative given their association with living harmoniously with nature*”.¹⁷ In their demand for authenticity and unique cultural identity, Neo-Pagans of the dominant culture subconsciously benefit from Neo-Colonialism and power inequalities.

The Consumerist values embedded in Neo-Paganism perpetuate the commodification of non-dominant cultural and spiritual practices, resulting in imbalanced cross-cultural interactions. Neo-Pagans of the dominant culture benefit from the privilege and power they gain from consuming diverse cultural practices. Simultaneously, the appropriation of non-dominant cultures stereotypes and generalises the experiences of persons as their customs and practices are simplified to be sold, forcibly deteriorating cultural identities and contributing to a Neo-Colonial Environment, as hypothesised.

¹⁵ Williams, L. (2020). *Miracles of our own making: The History of Paganism*. Reaktion Books.

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ Primary Research: Interview with Dr. Guy Redden