

Cultural Appropriation

Richard I. Lauf

In today's politically correct world, the term cultural appropriation has become a felony level offense against "sensitivity." Its use is, like most of these things, highly selective in its application. One must often wonder whether all the outrage of these cultural police might have more to do with marketing their consulting services for "cultural sensitivity." In any case, I hold just the opposite opinion – cultural appropriation leads to the enrichment of both cultures. Tonight, for our holiday celebration, I will present a personal experience which makes this point nicely.

As background to this story, I will first point out that when I was growing up, the family had two different churches. My father's job as organist and choir director was at a Swedish Covenant Lutheran Church. It still thought of itself as owing at least some fealty to the established Lutheran Church in Sweden. Like so many of the earlier ethnic communities, the older members of the church had stronger cultural ties to their Swedish heritage than even people my parents' age. I don't think they held services in Swedish, nor do I recall the minister as being fluently bilingual. My father had no Swedish heritage at all, but a job is a job.

His church lay far too far from our house to walk, and my mother didn't drive. If we all rode with my father, we five kids would have been captive for both services that my father played and the hour between services. Neither parent thought it was even remotely a good idea for us hellions to spend that much time there. Thus, my mother took us to the only protestant church within walking distance.

The congregation of this church were "Volga Germans." They had been sent to the Volga River region of Russia in the late 1700s, with the understanding that they could retain their religion, their culture and their language. They were like a number of other similar German communities spread around Europe as various German statelets exported a surplus of peasants to places with a surplus of arable land. They remained in the Volga region until Stalin thought that ethnic minorities posed a threat to his regime and deported them. Many of the displaced Volga Germans ended up in this neighborhood on the Northwest side of

Chicago. They still kept ethnic heritage very close – probably in part because they had to work hard to retain their distinctive German culture over the hundred and fifty years they were living in Russia. The church had a German language service every Sunday and a minister from Germany who could preach comfortably, sometimes interminably, in both languages.

One of the expressions of culture takes the form of crafts which support long-standing traditions. One of the Swedish traditions involved the burning of an advent candle each night during Advent. The candles had marks to show how much to burn each night and numbers indicating how many days until Christmas. The ladies of my father's church painted candles in this old traditional style for sale at church events. The candles were beautifully decorated with rather stylized seasonal decorations, often with pastel iridescent colors and using traditional Swedish decorative motifs.

The good ladies always gave my father one for his family. We enthusiastically appropriated this cultural practice. Every night during Advent, before bedtime we would gather around the piano. My father would play Christmas carols for us to sing, and we sang with gusto if not great vocal excellence. As day after day, Advent after Advent went on, you do lose interest in singing the first verse of Jingle Bells over and over. My father had plenty of carol books, even though he played all but the most arcane from memory.

Not only did we sing the standards, we sang many less heard carols. Some of our neighbors raised the proverbial eyebrow when they learned we sang Bring a Torch, Jeanette Isabela, on the grounds this was a Catholic song. I never understood at the time, nor do I today, how they could find us falling into questionable territory with this fine carol. Perhaps because it was originally a French dance it raised the specter of ultramontane sympathy for these dour old Germans. Nonetheless, rereading the words today, I still don't see their reservations.

We sang all the verses of better-known carols. How many carolers know the fifth or sixth verse of We Three Kings:

Myrrh is mine
Its bitter perfume, breathes
A life of gathering gloom

Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb

I always thought this a little gloomy, even if theologically anticipatory, for the Christmas season. I also still know the words by heart sixty years later.

In case we needed more amusement, we would periodically ask my father to play a carol in different ways. He would entertain us by playing it like the old piano accompaniments of silent movies, like the pianist in a Western saloon, or with all the physical keyboard frivolity we would see when watching Chico playing the piano in a Marx brothers movie.

Overall, our American family enthusiastically appropriated this Swedish tradition and made it our own. I have very fond memories of this tradition, which lasted all the years I can remember growing up. Even after my father left that church for another organist/choir director position, each November the ladies of Immanuel Swedish Church would drive over to our house to drop off an advent candle for us.

But our cultural appropriation didn't stop here by any means. My mother would often do various craft projects for one setting or another. Our German church held an annual holiday craft sale, patterned on the old German Christkindlmarkt tradition. My mother needed to contribute some seasonal crafts to the event. Suddenly she thought, why not advent candles? She bought a few dozen dinner tapers and a box of model paints and began to plan her advent candles. Like everything in our house, this was done at scale, just like our fruitcake production. She formed an assembly line, drilled long 2x4s to hold two or three dozen candles, then started painting. She would do all the brushstrokes using black paint, then switch to red and so on through the colors. She built up the multi-colored decorations one color at a time on all the candles at once.

My mother's decorations did not partake of the subtlety of the old Swedish traditional art. The colors were bolder: the snowmen, wreaths and so on were more akin to commercial art in a Christmas advertisement. She adopted the tradition, but also adapted the tradition to a new and different style. Her candles sold like hotcakes at our German church bazaar, and I know other families took up the advent candle tradition. As long as my mother was alive, she would mail Susan and me an advent candle. Even though I no longer count myself part of

that religious tradition, we usually burn our candle each night. Well, OK, sometimes we fall behind and have to burn two- or three-nights' worth at a sitting. We don't sing for the two of us, but we do echo the old cultural tradition.

My sister missed the candle after my mother died, so she started making some, albeit not on the scale my mother did. Her Jewish husband is a fine pianist and plays the carols as the candle burns while my sister and niece hang around the piano. She always sends Susan and me our own advent candle.

So, this is cultural appropriation – taking up a wonderful, family-oriented tradition, with both a craft embodiment in the form of the painted candle, and a whole-family activity. Yes, the tradition has been modified over the years. I like to think that if the Swedish ladies from Immanuel Church came back and saw their tradition still in practice more than sixty years after their first gift of a candle, they would be happy and proud and very far from expecting us to defend our flagrant cultural appropriation.