

Cultural Appropriation in Design and ‘The Cipher’

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Abstract

Dynamics of globalization redefine objects as agents of cultural exchange in various everyday contexts. Design activity constitutes a significant channel of cultural exchange because it presents objects to a system of social interactions that does not require geographical proximity of cultures. Design’s conceiving a cultural element in a product, thus starting the process of commoditization involves practices of cultural appropriation. Appropriation of cultural elements from their local contexts to be designed or re-designed translates the element’s cultural value into an exchange value that presents ‘*negotiated* decodings’ (Rogers, 2006) of the ‘different other’. Through design channels, ‘*the cipher*’ (Ono and Buescher, 2001), ‘*a figure through which various commodities with multiple exchange values are marketed*’, is produced as ‘*a social concept that circulates like a commodity*’ (Ono and Buescher, 2001, p. 26). ‘*The cipher*’ sets cultural stereotypes by encoding selected characteristics of a culture in a series of products and limits the (articulation) capabilities of design agency down to commodities floating in the market without any original cultural content.

Design’s interpretation of culture needs a critical reflection on the processes of commoditization and practices of cultural appropriation. Through this critical reflection, design’s capabilities to propose new grounds for cultural exchange as an ongoing process of growth can be explored. This paper discusses cultural appropriation as a key strategy in design’s interpretation of culture in products and recognizes cultural appropriation as a practice for creating ‘*the cipher*’ through cultural encoding and decoding. The research project named ‘A Kaffiyah Project’ presented in this paper focuses on the transformation of the *kaffiyeh* (the Middle Eastern headdress) from a traditional element of cultural identity to a fashion statement in different parts of the world. By using strategies of creating ‘*the cipher*’, the research explores and documents ways of decoding cultural stereotypes through design processes.

Keywords

cultural appropriation; ‘the cipher’; focus group; kaffiyeh; stereotype; participatory design.

‘*Cultural appropriation, defined broadly as the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture, is inescapable when cultures come into contact, including virtual or representational contact*’ (Rogers, 2006). Any type of cultural produce (whether tangible or intangible) is subject to cultural appropriation. As a social practice cultural appropriation operates in different spheres of exchange and power structures in the social realm, and therefore is a complex phenomenon. Even though the concept of cultural appropriation has been discussed in law, media and cultural studies, it is an undermined yet significant issue in design studies. Design naturally offers a site of mediation for practices of cultural appropriation by constructing exchange. Design’s role in such mediation is critical because the form of exchange determines how cultures interact and have an understanding of each other. Design offers strategies to encipher and distribute “selected” aspects of a particular culture in the form of commodities that have some sort of exchange value in global market. Therefore, design’s involvement in the appropriation and commoditization of cultures has the ability to create ‘*the cipher a figure through which various commodities with multiple exchange values are marketed*’ (Ono and Buescher, 2001, p. 26).

Recognizing the complex nature of cultural appropriation, Ziff and Rao (1997) express several concerns about appropriation's potential impacts in various domains. The first concern focuses on appropriation's role in causing cultural degradation by harming the integrity of the value system of a culture. Misrepresentation of a culture through appropriation can have '*corrosive effects on the integrity of the exploited culture*' as '*the appropriative conduct can erroneously depict the heritage from which is drawn*' (Riff and Zao, 1997, p. 9). Adolf Hitler's appropriation of the Swastika, symbol of good fortune and luck, demonstrates an extreme case of cultural transformation that determined the destiny of this prehistoric symbol. By claiming authority on this cultural element, Hitler's appropriation positioned the symbol at the heart of the Nazi imagery and changed the way the symbol is perceived forever. '*Before its appropriation by Nazidom, the swastika was used innocently as a design motif on everything from architecture to consumables, signifying good fortune and well being*' (Heller, 2000, p. 81) The appropriator's intention and way of displaying it publicly through propaganda and reproduction drained the cultural values attached to the symbol. Ultimately, Hitler and the swastika became interchangeable in the public eye. (Heller, 2000, p. 12)



From ancient times to date:



Appropriation: 1930s



Dead end

Figure 1. Swastika as an appropriated cultural element

Another concern raised by Ziff and Rao is '*the impact of appropriation on the cultural object itself*' (Ziff and Rao, 1997, p. 8). When material elements of a certain culture such as cultural goods, symbols, and traditional and sacred objects are either physically or conceptually removed from their local contexts, their original meanings are altered. Through this alteration, the cultural values attached to the elements are distorted. Commoditization constitutes a major way of de-contextualizing a cultural symbol and distorting its meaning. Basing his example on this concern, Rogers (1996) points at the distortion of Native spiritual traditions by New Age producers and consumers. A third critique identifies the crucial role that the appropriating party's intentions play in the transformation of the cultural element. Related also to commoditization, the concern is that '*those engaged in misappropriation might be occupying the commercial field*' (Ziff and Rao, 1997, p. 14) and exploiting intellectual property of a culture for financial gain. When financial gain is prioritized either by an outsider appropriator or by a member of the particular culture, the element becomes a commodity to be reproduced and consumed until it is replaced by other elements. Commoditization in this sense can 'fail to recognize sovereign claims' (Ziff and Rao, 1997, p. 17) of the particular culture over its cultural property. Generally, the appropriating party ignores the particular culture's claims of authority because power structures and available resources enable them to set the rules. Cultural appropriation's capacity to exploit and misrepresent constitutes the subtext that is common to all the concerns raised. When an appropriating party is not willing to understand the social and cultural function of a cultural element in its native context, the

relationship between the original value of the cultural element and its value created by the appropriator lacks meaningful links.

Elaborating on the concerns expressed above, it can be said that processes of commoditization appear to be instrumental for cultural appropriation because commoditization necessitates the removal of a cultural element from its local context. As a consequence of this removal, cultural value of the element is abstracted into an exchange value that inescapably takes on different meanings and functions within the global exchange system (Rogers, 1996, p. 488). While the gap between the element's cultural value and its exchange value defined by the appropriator grows larger, *'the commodity becomes a fetish, representation of values with no intrinsic relation to the object's use value, production or circulation'* (Rogers, 1996, p. 488).

When design practice approaches local cultures for the search for originality and presents a cultural element to the systems of exchange through products, it takes over a critical role in the conceptual distortion of the cultural element and the values attached to it. *'When culture is treated as a resource to be mined and shipped home for consumption'* (Rogers, 1996, p. 486) cultural appropriation appears to be a tool for commoditization of cultural elements. By deciding what to appropriate and interpret in a product, the designer claims authority to define which cultural elements deserve to be exchanged and even to stereotype a specific culture in a product. Such an approach *'presents a simplified view of cultural agency, which tends to be reduced to a set of a priori characteristics'* (Kluyukanov, 2008, p. 212) that are encoded and negotiated in products to create exchange value in the global market.

Even though cultural appropriation by design poses threats to the well-being of cultural elements and the cultures they represent, its potential to be used to create meaningful cultural exchange cannot be overlooked. The contribution of cultural appropriation to the evolution of world cultures is strongly related to the way in which the cultural, conceptual and material links are constructed. These links open channels for cultural interaction. Therefore, any cultural interaction that is devoid of any overarching cultural contexts might result in the loss of a set of values and also historical references that would contribute to the collective cultural memory. Even though cultural appropriation can sometimes be a harming activity, it can also be used as a counter-strategy to plot meaningful cultural exchange. Despite its commercial agenda, design practice has the potential to re-direct the commoditization processes of cultural elements and to "encipher" values that can integrate to the everyday practices of different cultures. *'Moving beyond an oversimplified view of culture in terms of consumer agency and revealing the significance of its phenomenal nature'* (Kluyukanov, 2008, p. 211) can eventually equip design with a social agenda that does not exclude financial agenda yet re-configure healthy overlaps between different agendas.

The Need for Research

The research presented in this paper aims to understand how cultural appropriation can be used as a critical strategy to explore ways of formulating meaningful channels of cultural exchange through design. The research can allow alternative paths of operation for design while approaching cultural and social realms. On the other hand, through this research design's capacities of intervening, translating, mediating relationships and negotiating (Dilnot, 2007) can be discussed in relation to global dynamics that configure patterns of production and consumption. Research-based design process offers an exploratory ground where *'the cipher'*, not as a form of commodity but a form of cultural negotiation, can be created and debated. In this process, due to its selective and interpretive nature, cultural appropriation can be used as a key strategy to create *'the cipher'* that does not prioritize financial gain.

The research seeks answers to the questions such as:

- What is the role of design practice in cultural exchange and transformation?
- How can design processes be used as a tool for deciphering cultural stereotypes?
- Is it possible to counter-direct the exploitative dynamics of commoditization to form cultural negotiations?
- Though new design processes, is it possible to recreate the lost links between a cultural element's original context and the new context of use?

In order to develop cultural appropriation as a strategy for the design process, the researcher addressed the need to understand the dynamics of cultural appropriation as a social activity. Documenting specific cases of cultural appropriation in design (including graphic design, industrial design and fashion) and identifying patterns of the appropriated elements global activity were crucial to understand the relationship between the working dynamics of design and cultural appropriation. During the preliminary research, the researcher identified that some cultural elements had already been reduced down to commercial clichés devoid of any original cultural content such as the Indian bindi, Che Guevara image or the Swastika. On the other hand, some of the examples were still going through the process of active cultural appropriation and commoditization.



From ancient times to date:



Late 1980s:



Appropriation: Mid 1990s



Now?

Figure 2. Gwen Stefani's appropriation of the Indian bindi / Bindi fashioned in stickers

The researcher found it relevant to identify a cultural element that is still going through the process of cultural appropriation by design and follow its path of evolution. By identifying the element's historical evolution, the researcher aimed to identify a pattern of evolution and to draw parallels to similar elements of transformation in progress. The researcher then aimed to create an alternative path of evolution by culturally appropriating the element and creating 'the cipher' to restore the element's original value in proposed designs. This process would also open up to discussion the role of the design practice and the designer in commoditizing cultural elements. The proposed designs would promote "a cipher as a system of references to the element's original cultural value", deconstructing Ono and Buescher's (2001) concept of *'the cipher'* that is instrumental in stereotyping a particular culture.

Research Framework

Drawing from the preliminary research on specific cases of cultural appropriation by design, the researcher identified a cultural element that demonstrates both historical and contemporary record of being culturally appropriated multiple times by various practices.

Kaffiyeh (traditional Middle Eastern headdress with a distinctive checkered pattern) has been an object of cultural appropriation throughout its centuries long history. The kaffiyeh, which is associated with violence and terrorism in mass-media, is widely used in film industry to animate characters of Eastern origin. Despite its negative connotations, kaffiyeh's recent transformation from being a symbol of Arab identity to being a fashion statement demonstrates the capabilities of design industry to lead the transformation of a cultural element.

In the beginning kaffiyeh was the symbol of male Bedouin identity. The Bedouin tribe had been dwelling in the desert of Arabia and was famous for its fierce resistance to outside influence. The Bedouin nomads were distinguished from the villagers and townspeople by their kaffiyehs. (Stillman, 1979, p. 66) Kaffiyeh was the tribal symbol that represented not only the resistant nature and the free spirit of the Bedouin, but also the social identity of the Bedouin. A significant change took place in village men's headdresses when the Palestinian Arabs started to unify against the British Mandate of Palestine. (Stillman, 1979, p. 68) 'The Great Uprising' lasted from 1936 to 1939 and changed the status of kaffiyeh for the rest of its life. The first appropriation of kaffiyeh happened around 1930s when the villagers and the townsmen adopted kaffiyeh and agal (the circle that is used to keep the fabric on the head) as the tools for expressing Palestinian nationalism.



Early 20th century



1920s

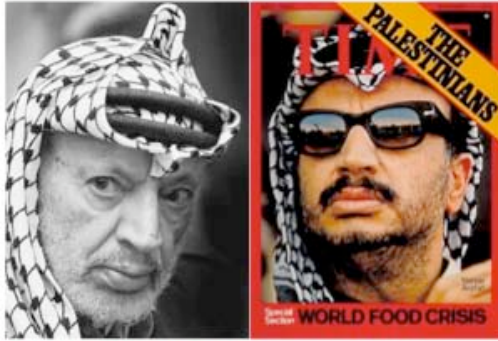


Appropriation 1: 1930s



Figure 3. Kaffiyeh's historical timeline of appropriation

In 1960s the black and white colored kaffiyeh was appropriated for the second time by Yaser Arafat (Chairman of The Palestine Liberation Organisation) and was introduced to the rest of the world. By making Kaffiyeh globally visible, Arafat started the process of kaffiyeh's transformation from a traditional cloth to an icon of resistance. The distinctive black and white pattern started appearing on the world press and gained public recognition. During 1970s, political dynamics in the Middle East and the uprising resistance to Israeli pressure caused the rise of an armed resistance. Kaffiyeh was appropriated for the third time by the armed rebels and was associated guerilla and violence.



Appropriation 2: Late 1960s



Since 1967 to date



Appropriation 3: 1970s

Figure 4. Kaffiyeh's appropriation by Yaser Arafat and its association with violence

In late 1980s, kaffiyeh took its place on the chaotic runways of anti-globalization and antiwar street protests. Arab nationalism transformed into rebellious self-expressions under the symbol of generic resistance.



Appropriation 4: Since late 1980s



Figure 5. Kaffiyeh as symbol of generic resistance

With the rise of the military chic fashion in 1990s, kaffiyeh got popular among subversive youngsters and fashionable rebels who expressed their resistance through clothing. As the popularity of kaffiyeh in public continued to grow, the scarf started to be the subject of design interventions in early 2000s. Fashion and design industries started to use kaffiyeh in design projects and new possibilities for application were explored.



1990s



Appropriation 5: Early 2000



Figure 6. Kaffiyeh as a fashion statement

Despite kaffiyeh's current status as a fashion statement, traditional kaffiyeh has been resisting to outer influence. Even when the Middle Eastern men exchanged their traditional clothes for the western clothes, they kept this article of headgear unchanged and therefore alive. (Scott, 2003, p.105) That's why kaffiyeh is a resistant cultural symbol that makes the male clothing and the hairstyles virtually identical throughout the Arabian Peninsula.



Figure 7. Kaffiyeh in Middle Eastern every day

The decorative kaffiyeh pattern with slightly different variations has been keeping the tradition and the cultural identity unified throughout the Middle East. Therefore the pattern is not only decorative but also functional since it allows the tradition to be distinguished.

Drawing from kaffiyeh's dual status as a traditional everyday element that represents Arab identity and also as a culturally appropriated and commodified cultural element, the researcher decided to intervene on kaffiyeh's evolution process. Kaffiyeh's history of evolution is characterized by multiple appropriations in various social, cultural and political contexts. Through this analysis, the researcher found it relevant to build on kaffiyeh's history and follow its path of evolution to the next level. The research-based design process constitutes the next stage of the transformation of kaffiyeh where kaffiyeh is appropriated one more time by the researcher. By critically reflecting on processes of cultural

appropriation, the researcher re-creates 'the cipher as a reference to kaffiyeh's original cultural value' according to the feedback of participants in focus groups that are staged during the design process.

Methods

Research-based design process is threefold. At the first stage of the process, three different focus group sessions were conducted with groups of participants from different cultural backgrounds. These focus group sessions aimed to bring together participants with low level of knowledge about kaffiyeh and Middle Eastern traditions. Initial data collection centered on formulating open-ended questions, recording the participants' answers and opening the sessions for discussion. Each participant's individual responses were documented and group discussions were structured with a round-table approach. Feedbacks received from the focus group participants were decisive in determining the structure and further steps of the design process. By comparing issues across different focus groups the researcher started creating product concepts that demonstrated different forms of appropriation and application of the kaffiyeh pattern. One of the focus groups was exposed to the product concepts and asked for commenting on the relevance of the new context of use. The researcher updated design criteria and production methods according to the participants' responses.

At the second stage of the process, the researcher aimed to present concepts for new contexts of use to a wider audience that is familiar with Kaffiyeh and the Middle Eastern traditions. 'A Kaffiyah Project' website was set up and an online survey was conducted with the members of Arab and non-Arab communities. Through this website, design concepts that were developed according to the outcomes of focus group sessions were demonstrated to the participants.

At the third stage, according to the results of the online survey, the researcher narrowed down the design concepts to form a cipher that reconstructs the original cultural meaning of the Kaffiyeh through a series of products. '*The cipher*' was made public through presentations and discussion groups.

Focus Groups

Throughout the research, focus group sessions played a crucial role in structuring the design process. The researcher planned to set up three different focus groups with the aim of addressing different set of questions. Each focus group session was conducted with 12 participants each. The researcher aimed to:

- Find out the group's level of familiarity kaffiyeh as a tradition that originated from Middle East
- Find out the general impression of traditional kaffiyeh according to the latest political and cultural incidents
- Find out how the impression of the scarf changes depending on the way it's fashioned or depending on the wearer

The questions that the researcher had prepared for the sessions were accompanied with two separate small-scaled experiments that helped the researcher to open up discussion through visual material.

In Focus Group I, which consisted of 12 participants (six male and six female junior college students of different majors), the researcher demonstrated three sets of photographs in which three models of different ethnic origins fashioned kaffiyeh differently. Participants were asked to look at the photographs and comment on the uses of kaffiyeh and its wearer. When the kaffiyeh is fashioned unlike its original way of use, for example fashioned as a belt around the waist, majority of the participants found it hard

to associate the headdress with any tradition or specific culture. The way the headdress is fashioned around the waist implied the model as a fashion enthusiast who is not interested in the original cultural value of the headdress. The African-American model that wraps kaffiyeh around her neck gave the participants the impression that the wearer was aware of the origin of the headdress yet still was fashioning it in a sophisticated way. On the other hand the male model projected danger and was identified as a Middle Eastern extremist by the participants. The male model brought up discussions about the role of mass-media and films in constructing stereotypes. All of the participants agreed that the use of scarf in a disguising manner was threatening.

Interpreting the responses of the participants, the researcher concluded that the participants' knowledge on kaffiyeh was based on the stereotypical depictions of Middle Eastern cultures on mass media. Only two of the participants knew about the origin and the tradition of kaffiyeh based on their experiences in Europe. On the other hand, the way the scarf was appropriated by the wearer and positioned on the body was decisive in the participant's perception of the pattern and the scarf.

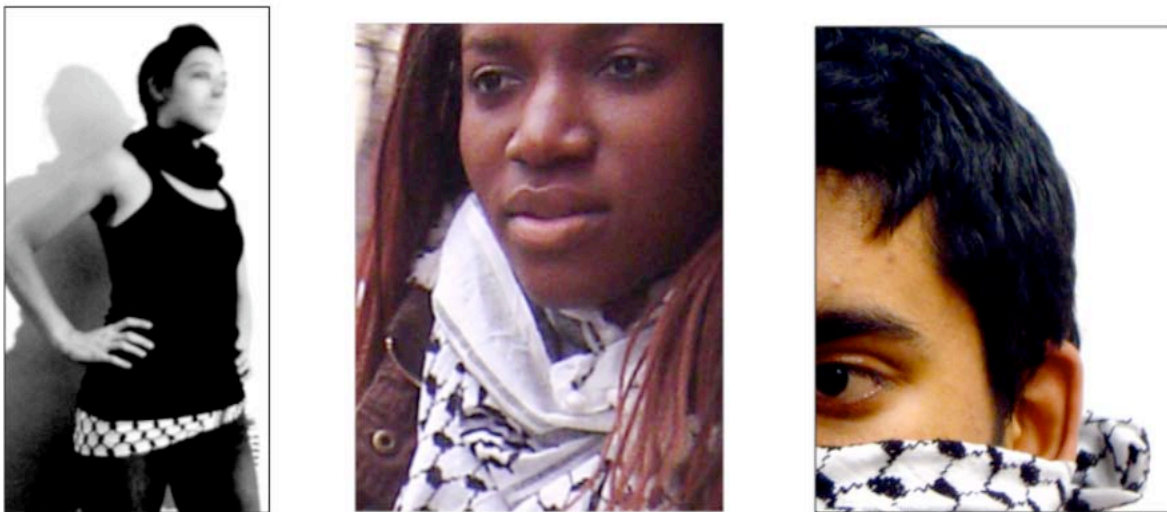


Figure 8. Models wearing kaffiyeh in different fashions

In Focus Group II, the researcher collaborated with 12 junior college students (8 female, 4 male) who were taking the Cultural Anthropology Course taught by Mary Martin at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. In this session, the researcher experimented with different portions of the kaffiyeh's checkered pattern. Such an experiment was planned to observe the role of the pattern in participant's recognition of the scarf as a traditional element. The researcher also aimed to find out the smallest portion of the pattern that identifies the shown fabric as a Middle Eastern authentic cultural element. The optimal portion of the pattern that is recognized as of Middle Eastern origin would be appropriated and used in new contexts by the researcher.

In this session, the participants were exposed to different sections of the cloth and were asked whether they were familiar with the sections that gradually got larger. This way participant's perception of the pattern as an ethnic/authentic or a Middle Eastern design was observed. Moreover, the earliest level which participants identified as a part of Middle Eastern, ethnic element was addressed. (Number 004 below indicates the smallest recognizable portion of the kaffiyeh pattern that the researcher planned to appropriate.)



Figure 9. Experiments with portions of the pattern

Before stepping into the third focus group session, the researcher appropriated the smallest portion of the pattern (the portion consists of all three elements of the pattern at once) and applied the pattern on various everyday objects. Instead of re-purposing the scarf, the researcher/designer abstracted the scarf into its pattern and reproduced pattern as the essence of the kaffiyeh and its tradition.

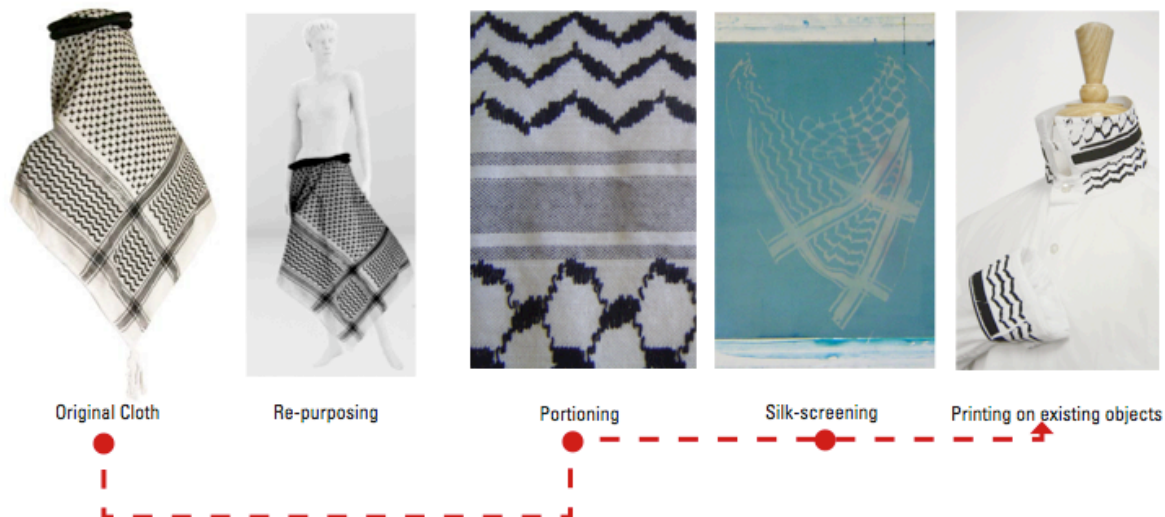


Figure 10. Reproduction process

Having reproduced the pattern on different everyday objects, the researcher moved on to the third focus group session. The participants of this focus group were twelve junior students (8 female, 4 male) who

were taking the Middle Eastern Art and Culture Course taught by Professor Mary Martin at the University of the Arts Philadelphia. All of the participants were familiar with Middle Eastern cultures and traditions. After giving detailed brief on the kaffiyeh' original context of use and cultural value, the researcher exhibited the products as the new context of use for kaffiyeh. By placing the pattern on different parts of the body and relating the visibility of the pattern to the structure of the products, the researcher asked for participants' opinion on the relevance of the pattern application.



Figure 11. Researcher's experimentation with the pattern

According to eight of the participants, application of the pattern around the neck could have some vague associations with the original use of kaffiyeh. The participants mentioned that gestural aspects of the shirt and somehow subversive application of the pattern recalled kaffiyeh's association with protest. However, the other applications were considered disrespectful and meaningless.

Drawing from the participants' feedbacks, the researcher revised the design criteria and focused on applications that would:

- Refer to kaffiyeh's original place on the body through the placement of the pattern and the use of the product
- Engage the new contexts of use with everyday life
- Draw meaningful links between the gesture proposed by the new context and the original use of the cloth.

The participants' input in this session was crucial for identifying the next step of the process. Even though the idea of 'the cipher' wasn't mentioned in the sessions, the researcher aimed to formulate a set of products that would relate to different uses of kaffiyeh and values attached to it. Debating this issue over products or material examples helped the designer to charge different aspects of the products' physicality such as material, size, and function. The researcher also found it relevant not to create a new product from scratch but to build on the existing products. This way these everyday objects would host the essence of kaffiyeh and the participants would relate to the objects more easily.

For the next step of the design process, the researcher had enlarged the scope of pattern application to various everyday contexts. The new set of products proposed new associations between the materials or functions of the products and the cultural values represented by traditional kaffiyeh. For example could the lost uniqueness of kaffiyeh within the process of commoditization be restored in a diamond necklace produced in the shape of the kaffiyeh pattern? Or could the significance of this Middle Eastern element be restored by applying the pattern on loaded objects such as a veil? The researcher produced alternatives for different contexts of use and grouped these products under concept that can be presented clearly to a wider audience.

Online Survey

In the next phase of the design process, the researcher conducted online surveys with participants from members of Arab and non-Arab communities that are familiar with kaffiyeh and Middle Eastern culture in some ways. The researcher contacted Arab associations such as Penn Arab Student Society, Arab-American Association of New York, Al-Awda Palestinian Right to Return Group and Arab Women Active in the Arts and Media. The researcher designed a website (www.thekaffiyehproject.com) and displayed her the product proposals under main concepts.

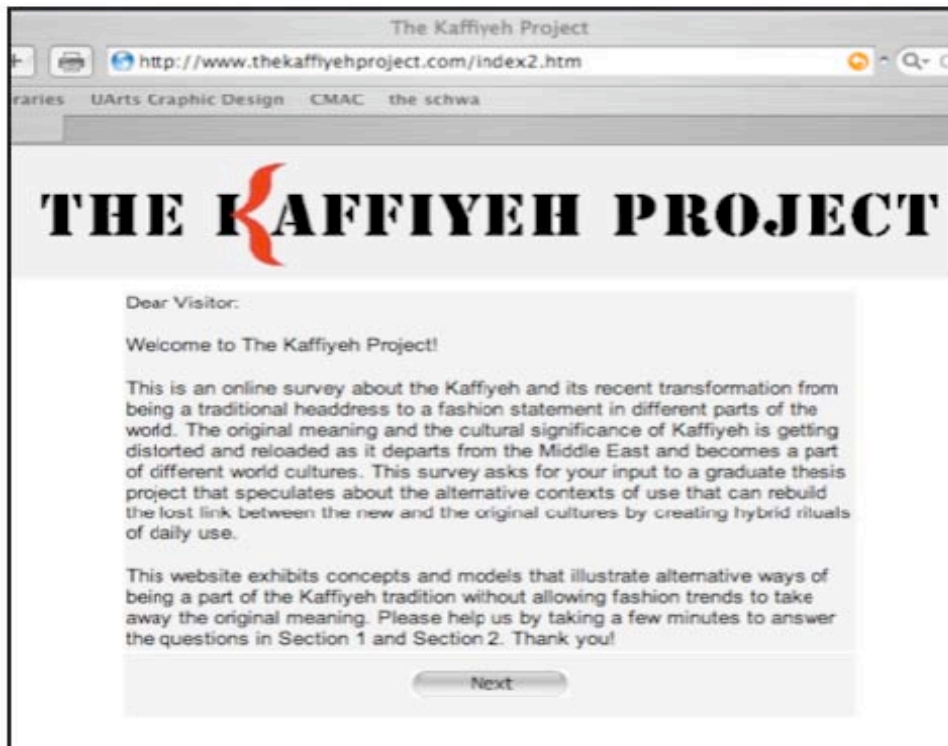


Figure 12. The opening page of the online survey


The survey was composed of an introductory slide show that introduces kaffiyeh to the participants, a short questionnaire that aimed to collect information about the participants and their level of familiarity with kaffiyeh, and the questionnaire about the concepts that were presented through drawings, prototypes and illustrations on each page with 3 questions.




The participants were asked to rate concepts according to:

- The success of the new concepts in relation to the original use of kaffiyeh
- The success pattern application on the level of identification of the pattern as “a kaffiyeh”
- The relevance of the concept to the tradition on the level of connection between the new context of use and the traditional context
- The significance of the concept in terms of the relevance between the choice of materials and the application of the pattern
- The success for the preservation of the essence of kaffiyeh in terms of the relevance of the place that the pattern is applied to kaffiyeh’s original position on the body

Concept : Kaffiyeh in Business

This concept illustrates alternative uses of the Kaffiyeh for people who would like to use it everyday but are not able to express their connection with it in formal business environments. The original Kaffiyeh is dyed and the pattern is spread around the neck. Kaffiyeh pattern is externally printed under the folds of the shirt and on the reverse side of the necktie to give the user the choice to show or hide Kaffiyeh depending on the context.



Business shirt

Necktie

1. Please tell us how "Kaffiyeh in Business" would rate on the following attributes. (5:Excellent, 1:Poor)

a. Relation to the traditional use of Kaffiyeh ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

b. Identification of the pattern as "Kaffiyeh" ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

c. The new context of use ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

d. The use of details ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

2. Which one of the application of the pattern is more successful in relation to the original use of Kaffiyeh ?

☐ Business shirt

☐ Necktie

☐ Both

☐ None

3. Why would you be interested in using one of the described products?

☐ I like the fact that the products offer flexibility of use depending on the context.

☐ I like the fact that the pattern is hidden and therefore special to me.

☐ I like making subtle statements about my stylistic choices.

☐ For all of the reasons above.

☐ I wouldn't be interested using any of the products.

Concept : Growing Up With Kaffiyeh

This concept places Kaffiyeh in a daily context that transforms the function and the meaning into beautiful memories of infancy. The pattern is applied around the neck and the meaning is retained as a memorable part of a person's childhood.






Baby blanket

Baby bib

1. Please tell us how "Growing up with Kaffiyeh" would rate on the following attributes. (5:Excellent, 1:Poor)

a. Relation to the traditional use of Kaffiyeh ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

b. Identification of the pattern as "Kaffiyeh" ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

c. The new context of use ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

2. Which one of the application of the pattern is more successful in relation to the original use of Kaffiyeh ?

☐ Baby bib

☐ Baby blanket

☐ Both

☐ None

3. Why would you be interested in using one of the described products?

☐ I would be able to educate my child about other world cultures.

☐ I like the way the pattern is applied.

☐ I would like to keep the products because they are interesting as collectibles.

☐ I wouldn't be interested using any of the products.

Figure 13. Survey pages from the website

The product proposals were grouped under concepts that could be related to personal stories from everyday life. By grouping the meaning and function of objects under main concepts, the researcher aimed to associate feelings such as comfort, need for expression of identity, security and need for protection with functions of kaffiyeh in its original context. These concepts encipher the essence of kaffiyeh in the material qualities of products.

Concept : Sleeping With Kaffiyeh

This concept rebuilds the relationship between the person and the Kaffiyeh through the daily act of sleeping. The person sleeps and dreams on the Kaffiyeh pattern that is printed on the pillow case and also on the wallpaper that glows only in the dark. The pattern is intentionally placed around the person's head in order to relate the new application to the original position of the Kaffiyeh on the body.

Pillowcase

Glow in the dark wallpaper

1. Please tell us how "Sleeping with Kaffiyeh" would rate on the following attributes. (5:Excellent, 1:Poor)

a. Relation to the traditional use of Kaffiyeh ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

b. Identification of the pattern as "Kaffiyeh" ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

c. The new context of use ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

2. Which one of the application of the pattern is more successful in relation to the original use of Kaffiyeh ?

☐ Pillowcase

☐ Wallpaper

☐ Both

☐ None

3. Why would you be interested in using one of the described products?

☐ I like the way the pattern is applied.

☐ I like the concept of being close to Kaffiyeh while sleeping.

☐ I think the products are intimate and subtle in expression.

☐ I wouldn't be interested using any of the products.

Concept: Kaffiyeh Outdoors

This concept illustrates Kaffiyeh as a part of everyday life by placing the pattern on daily objects such as umbrellas and rain bonnets. The pattern is intentionally placed over the head in order to create a link between the new use and the original use.

Umbrella patterned from inside

Rain bonnet

1. Please tell us how "Kaffiyeh Outdoors" would rate on the following attributes. (5:Excellent, 1:Poor)

a. Relation with the traditional use of Kaffiyeh ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

b. Identification of the pattern as "Kaffiyeh" ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

c. The new context of use ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

d. Materials chosen (plastic) ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1

2. Which one of the application of the pattern is more successful in relation to the original use of Kaffiyeh ?

☐ Umbrella

☐ Rain bonnet

☐ Both

☐ None

3. How interested would you be in using one of the described products?

☐ Not at all interested.

☐ Not very interested.

☐ Neither interested nor uninterested

☐ Somewhat interested

☐ Very interested

Figure 14. Survey pages from the website

40 participants (23 male-17 female), who took the online survey, rated the concepts and narrowed down the proposals. 32 of the participants were familiar with the scarf and its cultural value. The participants also provided a set of new criteria that the researcher had to consider for the final stage in creating 'the cipher as a system of references to kaffiyeh's original cultural value.'



Figure 14. Proposals that received the highest scores

Formulating 'The Cipher' and Displaying the Research-based Proposals

Even though various feedbacks from the participants structured the design process, 'the cipher' that would create meaningful links between the new contexts of use and the original context of kaffiyeh needed to be solidified according to one last set of criteria. The researcher used kaffiyeh's original definition as her last set of to produce 'the cipher.' By enciphering the original definition of the scarf, a set of references to the original scarf would be created. According to its original definition kaffiyeh is:

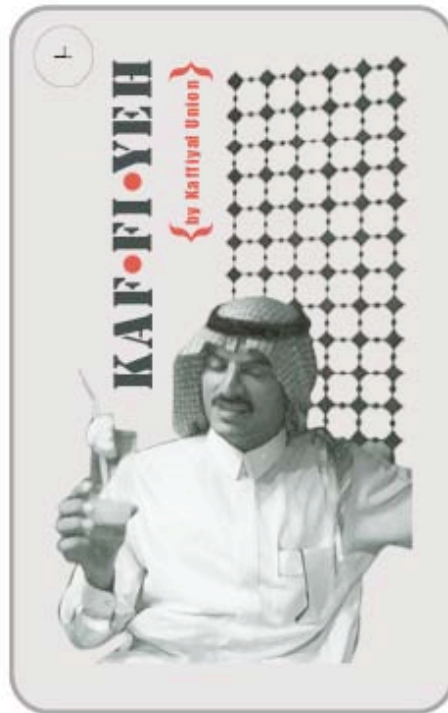
- A big square cloth that can be multi-purposed depending on the context of need
- A head-dress that protects the face and the neck from sun, wind and dust

- A sign of modesty and respect
- A resistant traditional cloth with the distinctive pattern
- The signifier of the Bedouin tribe
- The symbol of Arab identity
- Symbol of resistance

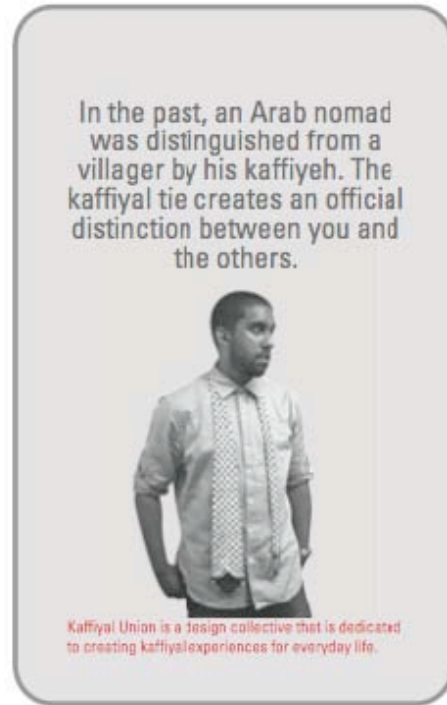
When the researcher filtered the results of the online survey through these criteria, the proposals that create meaningful links between original kaffiyeh and the contexts of appropriation formed 'the cipher'. Each part of 'the cipher' refers to an aspect of the original cultural element and creates links between the new context of use and the original context. Along with the product proposals that created 'the cipher', the researcher conceived the design of supplementary references that would communicate the cultural exchange the proposals are offering. The researcher designed product tags that refer both to the original and new contexts of use with the help of graphics and text. These tags juxtapose the traditional and new context of kaffiyeh on the front and the back. The text accompanying the new product explains how original function of the scarf transformed into a similar function in a totally new everyday context.



Figure 15. Kaffiyal Umbrella Product Tag / Back and front

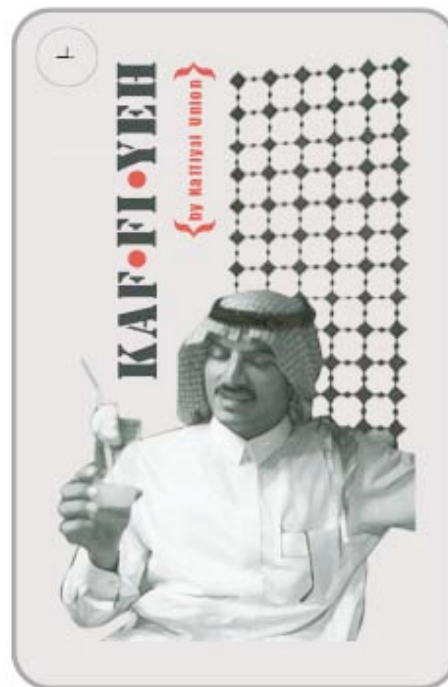


FRONT

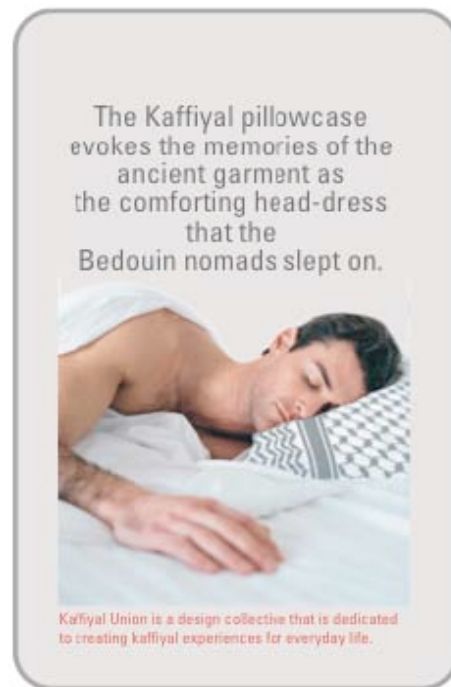


BACK

Figure 16. Kaffiyah Tie Product Tag / Back and front



FRONT



BACK

Figure 17. Kaffiyah Pillow Case Product Tag / Back and front



Figure 18. Kaffiyeh Bib Product Tag / Back and front

The researcher promoted concept of 'the cipher' along with the product and the tags. 'The cipher' as a system of meaningful cultural references took on an educational yet entertaining role for both the members of the appropriating culture and the appropriated culture. 'The cipher' presents the design practice's potentials to create meaningful distortion that intends to carry the essence of a cultural element within the products. Practice of cultural appropriation is strategized as a tool for creating 'the cipher.'

Conclusion

This paper presented a research based design process that used cultural appropriation as a strategy to commodify a traditional cultural element (Kaffiyeh) yet to protect its cultural content with the help of 'the cipher'. Ono and Buescher's (2001) concept of the 'cipher' as a commodity was transformed into 'the cipher' as a set of meaningful references that travel across two different cultural contexts. The project has been a multi-dimensional and speculative intervention into kaffiyeh's ongoing process of transformation. Concepts of appropriation, cultural identity, cultural stereotypes, cultural exchange and globalization were debated over products.

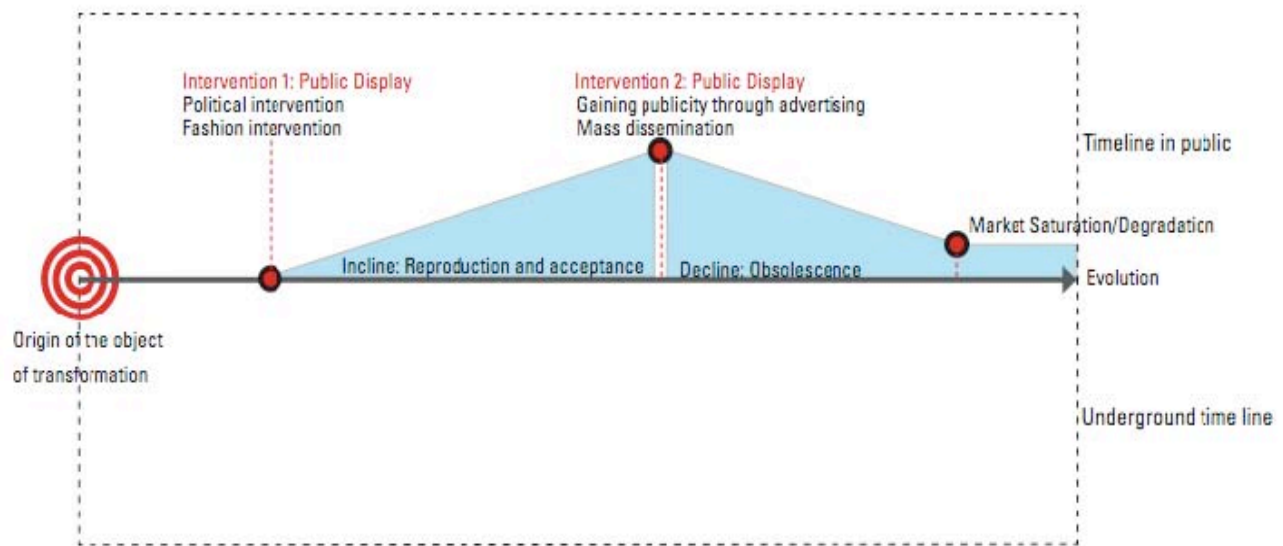


Figure 19. Chart of evolution through cultural appropriation

When a cultural element is removed from its native context through cultural appropriation, its cultural value is abstracted into an exchange value that floats in the market devoid of any cultural content. In a typical process of commoditization, the object of cultural appropriation starts to get away from its origin conceptually with the help of an intervention (design practice, public and political figures, fashion) that presents the cultural element to the public. With this first intervention, the cultural element also interacts with commercial and business cycles. Evolution of the object in public inclines as the public becomes familiar with it and accepts it. At this stage, the commodity is mass-disseminated and reproduced. Before the evolution in public starts to decline, the second intervention happens as a second gesture to re-establish or strengthen status of the commodity in everyday. As the market gets saturates, popularity of the image starts to decline and the public loses its interest in the image of the object. In the end the commoditized cultural element is reduced down to a commercial cliché that continues its life with little public interest.

In 'A Kaffiyal Project', the researcher observed the process of evolution and intervened on the process of commoditization at the point where the commodified cultural element was mass-disseminated. By creating a conceptual underground path (or 'the cipher' as a system of reference) that links the cultural element back to its origin of use, the researcher aimed to restore the lost link between two exchanging cultures. This conceptual underground path, 'the cipher', redirects the evolution path of the cultural element and elevates it to another level.

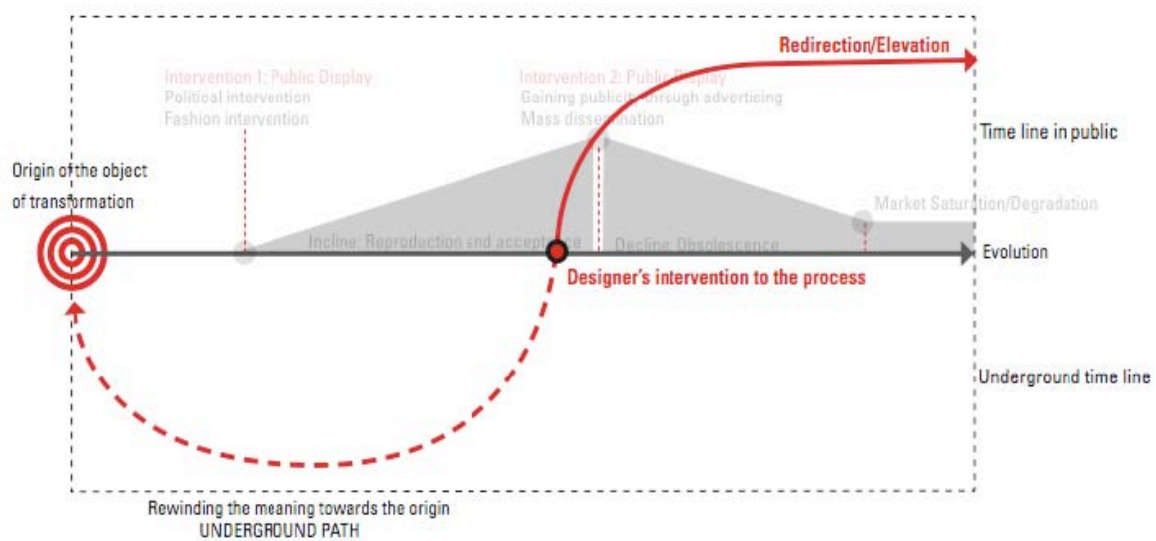


Figure 20. Chart of evolution after design intervention

It is important to recognize that products create channels of exchange in various dimensions. Their material, physical, structural, cultural and social qualities have the potential to host references and change perceptions. Products, through design, have the potential to plot interactions between different set of social and cultural actors. In an increasingly saturated global world where products circulate in closed loops of consumption and taste, it is critical for the design activity to create room for critical reflection. Developing a critical agenda for design requires debate, participation and open-processes of creation.

On the other hand, practice of cultural appropriation needs to be discussed and explored more in the realm of product design as a part of design's social agenda. Design processes have the potential to challenge the destiny of commoditized cultural symbols in ways that share the authority of deciding on the value of a cultural element with the society. Despite its negative implications on culture, cultural appropriation can indeed contribute to the evolution of cultures and redefinition of the boundaries, if the concerns that were stated in the introduction are taken into consideration. Through critical and participatory processes, design practice can generate sensitivities towards processes of cultural exchange and also create awareness on its crucial role in determining the evolutionary path of cultures.

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Hitler Images from Heller, S. (2000). *The Swastika: Symbol Beyond Redemption?*. New York: Allworth Press.

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Bindi sticker from <http://www.dollsofindia.com/product/AC83/>

Figure 3.

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Figure 8 – Figure 20.

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