

SPORTS

Appropriate or appropriation?

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Complaints about costumes spark examination of ethics

Should a crowd of people don face paint and flimsy costumes embodying -- some would say, mocking -- the stereotypical image of a Caucasian person, people would be insulted, uncomfortable, outraged. But surely, such a politically incorrect fiasco would be prevented in this day and age of objectively improved social awareness.

Yet, that is exactly how some felt after students dressed in various loose interpretations of traditional Native American garb at a home football game.

Junior Sullivan Chamberlain was uncomfortable with students' choices of dress due to her own Native American heritage.

"I have Native American family on both sides...I'm technically biracial, I don't look it, but everyone else in my family, on my dad's side, you can tell that they're very very Native American," Chamberlain said, "and it offends me that it's people dressing up as basically my family."

Chamberlain also expressed concerns about Native American representation in the mascot itself.

"They're using (Native Americans) as a mascot, the same way you'd use a tiger or a dog... It's basically comparing an entire race of people to animals," Chamberlain said.

She disagrees with the argument that students are just drawing attention to a tribe that lacked representation.

"I really don't like the fact that we're appropriating culture in the name of 'representing' a race and using them as our mascot... Native Americans are a group of people as a whole. Because it's a race," Chamberlain said. "It would be like if someone said

we're gonna make black people as a whole our mascot and dress up in 'black face,' that wouldn't be okay. So I don't see why it would be okay for Native Americans to be represented that way."

Martha Zierden, the Charleston Museum's Curator of Historical Archaeology, said there are few remaining links to the Wando Tribe's actual cultural traditions.

"As the parent of a Wando graduate, I'm familiar with your logo and your sports traditions. There is, unfortunately, very little known about the Wando," Zierden said. "The Wando ceased to exist as a separate entity by 1699 because of smallpox."

In regards to the Tribe's garb, images by John White and von Reck -- both featured in the Museum's galleries -- are some of the only points of reference.

"For coastal/southeastern peoples, dress evolved through the colonial period, as native people traded deerskins to European colonists, in exchange for cloth, shirts and clothing embellishments," Zierden said.

Zierden compared the debate about the Wando mascot to another example of the revision of Native American mascots: The Florida State University "Seminoles."

"Over the last few decades, they have engaged the Seminole Tribe of Florida in an ongoing dialogue and formal relationship, including a fiscal one... Incorrect caricatures, such as a feather war bonnet used by Plains groups, have been replaced by correct dress and customs," Zierden said. "The Seminole as a sovereign nation evolved in the 19th century, and their choice of dress is well documented."

As a student at FSU in the 1970s, Zierden recalled a professor of anthropology, Hale Smith, calling for these changes. The Seminoles were depicted in feathers and warbonnets -- a stereotype seen on movies and in television -- despite never having worn them.

Now FSU checks with the Seminole tribe for accuracy on all changes made to the mascot to avoid a disrespectful rendering, Zierden said.

"Unfortunately, with the disappearance of the Wando only a few decades after the settlement of Charles Town, we have no such resources. Nor do we have currently identified Wando people to consult," she said.

Despite lacking access to information

about the Wando's tradition, some students still urge the school toward what they feel is more respectful imagery.

Seniors Zach Green and Connor Griffin have taken initiative and are in the process of a formal proposal to reinstate the physical mascot to the Chophouse section at home football and basketball games.

"It really is a center of the Chophouse spirit. However, we wanna bring it back more as... more of a fearless leader type warrior, and less of a racist caricature," Green said. "It's important to me because I really do believe in the power of school spirit, especially at Wando...I think rallying 4,100 kids around something, in doing that it's important that that central figure isn't carrying any negative stigma around it."

Green clarified their ideas are not exactly mirroring those of the student petition that was passed around previously, which sought to eliminate all of the Native American aspects to the Wando "brand."

"There were some strong, valid sentiments expressed throughout. But what Connor and I would really like to do, is specifically just the chophouse mascot," Green said. "Not necessarily pertaining to all aspects of the school. We just wanna focus on bringing that central spirit back."

Associate Principal Jeff Blankenship added that the situation mirrors yet another instance of mascot revision similar to what some students are calling for -- Syracuse University or the University of Illinois changing their names because they were Native American mascots.

"I've been 16 or 17 years now, and it seems like this came up when I was a teacher when they were getting rid of Illinois and Syracuse and what not, but it never came to any kind of fruition as far as us even thinking about changing our mascot as far as I know," Blankenship said.

In regards to the mascot itself, Blankenship understands the controversy but feels the symbol is fitting to Wando.

"I have nothing but respect for the heritage of Mount Pleasant. If we're named after the Wando River, that makes sense that we're named after another part of our culture here," he said. "And I think warriors is a good mascot for us."

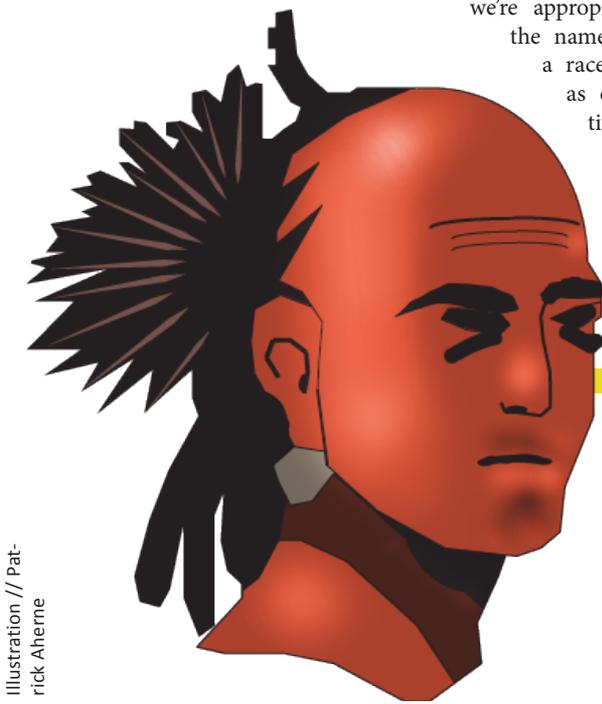


Illustration // Patrick Aherne

The Cusabo

- ▷ The Cusabo were a family of tribes along the coast of South Carolina.
- ▷ They include the Wando, Combahee, Edisto, Escamacu, Etiwan, Kiawah, Ahepoo and Wimbee.
- ▷ They valued order and viewed chaos as evil.
- ▷ They believed in ritual healing by the village priests because they thought the spirit and body were closely linked.

English contact

- ▷ In 1670 the English colony, Charles Town was established on Cusabo land.
- ▷ The Stono war was the Stono and Coosa tribes rebelling against the colonists and it resulted in the Native Americans being taken away and enslaved.
- ▷ The Cusabo chiefs ceded large tracts of land to the colonists from 1675 to 1682.
- ▷ By 1750, the tribe no longer existed.