

Cultural Appropriation and Appreciation in the Legend of the Five Rings Roleplaying Game:

A Sample Commentary Essay

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The Legend of the Five Rings Roleplaying Game (L5R) centers on the fictional empire of Rokugan, itself based on feudal Japan with elements of Chinese, Mongolian, Korean, and other East and Southeast Asian cultures included. My engagement with the game began when I was an undergraduate in San Antonio; it has persisted since, including as ownership of the intellectual property was transferred and a new edition of the game was released in 2018. Having played it and helped to administer it, both officially and informally, I have immersed myself in the property's narrative for nearly twenty years. That immersion has made me aware of some difficulties surrounding the game. Because L5R, originally an American product, works in an amalgamation of feudal Japanese and not-necessarily-contemporary-to-it East Asian cultures, there are concerns of whether the game is culturally appreciative or culturally appropriative. On the whole, though, while there are appropriative elements, the game is appreciative of those cultures from which it borrows.

Ascertaining whether L5R is appropriative or appreciative requires the development of a rubric by which to assess those qualities, which entails working from particular understandings of those terms. For example, Matthes (2016) follows other scholars in regarding cultural appropriation as the representation of a culture by those outside it, the use of cultural styles by those outside that culture, or the procurement or possession of cultural objects by those outside that culture, especially when the outsider is in a position of dominance over or oppression of the culture producing them; Matthes adds cultural essentialism, the reduction of a complex culture to oversimplified surface features, to that definition. The scholarly take is supplemented by prevailing views that assign the representation of authenticity to the outsider, as well, and the

lack of appropriate compensation for goods received (that is, someone can purchase a cultural object that is offered for sale without being appropriative). Generally, appropriation is decried as an oppressive practice akin to theft, one not desirable.

In contrast, cultural appreciation might follow the idea advanced by Von Bergen, Von Bergen, Stubblefield, & Bandow (2012) under the name of “authentic tolerance.” That is, it can take the form of engaging with persons across cultures with demonstrated respect for people, if not practices, in a manner encouraging self-reflection and consideration of assumptions. To it might be added an explicit disclaiming of ownership or dominance, something that has emerged as particularly important since their work. Or, instead, cultural appreciation might follow the definition articulated by Malmo and Moiseichik (2017) as they examine martial arts communities: “the perceived attitude towards, and awareness, cultivation, implementation or integration of, the understanding of customary beliefs, social forms, shared attitudes, values, goals, practices, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group,” especially a favorable attitude that does not assume greater ownership or authenticity with the culture at large. An amalgamation of the two, a favorable and respectful attitude that makes use of agreeable traits without claiming ownership of them and without condemning those who practice the less agreeable, might serve as a useful working definition of the term, a useful rubric for a desirable trait.

The L5R materials to which such definitions might be applied were released in a new edition in 2018. The new edition also reset the narrative that had grown up through years of play, offering a fresh start for players; it consequently marks a new beginning for analysis and interpretation. In the materials, narrative focus is on the empire of Rokugan, described geographically as similar to mainland China and culturally as largely feudal-era Japanese

(Brooke & Ostrander, 2018, pp. 6-19); that is, the empire spans a large eastern landmass bracketed by mountains and jungles, punctuated by rivers, boasting a mighty wall, and ruled by katana-wielding samurai gathered into clans under a presiding, heaven-descended emperor. A number of sources are reported as undergirding L5R, many of which are from or are scholarly treatments of Japan; Musashi's *Book of Five Rings*, Sei's *Pillow Book*, Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*, *The Tales of the Heike*, Inazo's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, and Kurosawa's films are prominent among them (Brooke & Ostrander, 2018, p. 332). It is clear from the descriptions and the informal bibliography, then, where the game's inspirations lie, and it is from those inspirations and their treatment that the issue of whether the game is appropriative or appreciative emerges.

Some appropriative elements emerge even in the bibliography. Relatively few of the scholarly works referenced appear to derive from the cultural inheritors of the tropes in which L5R deals, and several of the fictional works also seem to derive from outside sources (Brooke & Ostrander, 2018, p. 332). Treating in such works, which themselves tend toward the appropriative, makes it more likely that L5R is itself appropriative. Similarly, the selected works appear to tend towards cultural essentialism; just as Warner Brothers and Disney cartoons and Hollywood films present skewed, over-simplified ideas of Americanness, anime of any quality and even such excellent films as Kurosawa's will present necessarily limited and heavily overdetermined ideas of Japaneseness and East Asian identity. Working from them tends to make for an essentialist, appropriative product.

A more overtly appropriative attitude emerges earlier in the text, as well. A sidebar noting the inclusion of mature themes in the work explicitly urges "individual groups to determine which elements of the setting they engage with in the stories they tell" (Brooke & Ostrander, 2018, p. 6). The sidebar references a later section of the text, in which effective

administration of the game is discussed (Brooke & Ostrander, 2018, p. 282). While content warnings are appropriate, there is always a peril of imposing cultural mores inappropriately. While it is the case that games need rules, and it is the case that stories cannot engage all aspects of even their own milieus (as the plethora of supplemental materials for any number of imaginary worlds attests), making such comments overtly tends to assign determination of authenticity to consumers of derivations from cultural products. In brief, it is appropriative.

But there are also aspects of L5R that are appreciative of the cultural inspirations for the game, rather than strictly appropriative. One such is related to the aforementioned list of references for the game. While the list is skewed, as noted above, it does ascribe authority over the intellectual underpinnings of the game to more presumably authentic sources, disclaiming some degree of ownership of cultural identities not the game-owners' own and inclining the game toward the appreciative. Similarly, the game makes repeated reference in callouts and sidebars to the fact that it is inspired by feudal Japan and other cultures rather than a faithful representation of them; the Your Game, Your Rokugan callout (Brooke & Ostrander, 2018, p. 274) and the Bushido in Historical Japan sidebar (Brooke & Ostrander, 2018, pp. 300-301) both note, for example, that L5R works in fiction derived from history. They join the long-standing assertion in the game's player community that "Rokugan is not Japan" to highlight the non-representative nature of the game's milieu. By making itself explicitly other than a "faithful" representation of the cultures inspiring it, then, L5R makes itself more appreciative of those cultures than appropriative of them.

Further, while some simplification is necessary for any simulation, and a game is necessarily a simulation, L5R works to provide a rich and detailed background for its narrative milieu and the characters who work in it. Roleplaying games are narrative exercises in which

players describe the thoughts, words, and actions of characters they create; nearly a third of the L5R core rules is devoted to the character creation process (Brooke & Ostrander, 2018, pp. 40-139), reflecting the importance placed upon it, and much of that portion of the book involves integrating the character into and cultivating the character from the narrative milieu. Players are, in effect, asked to immerse themselves in more than a rudimentary, superficial culture, one likely to be markedly different from their own, and in ways that have both benefits for adhering to and penalties from deviating from social norms that make sense in the narrative context. Rather than an essentialized caricature of a culture, then, L5R presents a nuanced and detailed milieu that examines its sources without claiming authority over them, so that while there is some potential for appropriation in certain circumstances, the game is, on the whole, appreciative of what inspires it.

There is more work to do on L5R, of course. The core rules are not the only materials released for it as of this writing, and more materials are pending. That work, though, seems poised to begin in a good place, and it is to be hoped that L5R will continue to be more appreciative than appropriative of its source materials' cultures of origin.

## References

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