Research to Practice Paper

Overcoming Social Isolation in Marginalized Ethnic Communities:

A Debate on Universalism vs. Grassroots Musical Movements as a Powerful Tool to Foster belonging, Respect, and Recognition

"So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me."

I Lost My Talk - Rita Joe, from Song of Eskasoni.

Morgane Ollier

INTD 497
Lessons of Community and Compassion: Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social Connectedness Through Policy and Program Development

McGill University
Professor Kim Samuel

INTRODUCTION

While hundreds of minorities across the world, especially in vulnerable and precarious settings, lack proper social connections with their peers and suffer from deep isolation, some ethnic communities, deeply affected by the course of globalization and history, are now attempting to re-gain their voice and identity, but more simply, their right to equality. As Musicians Without Borders emphasizes, "To heal, people need connection and community."[1] And music is one of the solutions to it.

Building connections and giving hope to the most in need are among the ways music has helped vulnerable communities regain confidence and build belonging. Artistic expression and empowerment help advance human rights not only by enabling minorities to claim their rights and traditions, but also by encouraging individuals and communities to hold governments accountable for change. As a result, music and social connectedness are deeply related. Scholars have, however, come to debate the universality of music and its cross-cultural aspect in development programs.

As a result, this paper will first ask: What are the best ways to make music a meaningful tool for empowerment and connectedness for underrepresented and underprivileged minorities? While music has tremendous potential to spur positive social change, its creation, meaning, and use vary across countries and communities. Thus, one needs to consider grassroots experiences carefully.

This paper will argue for community-based programs that foster musical expression and identity in some of the most marginalized communities as a way to reconnect within and across groups. This argument will first draw upon A. Sen's and M. Nussbaum's Capability Approach to help redefine the lenses through which actors must look when developing musical programs

---

[1] In *Why Music?* section. Musicians Without Borders's website. Accessed on Dec. 2017.

to combat isolation. After looking at "universalist" programs and conventions as counter-intuitive efforts, this paper will emphasize the necessity to put people back at the forefront of musical programs for inclusion by exploring the case of Kaneka music in New Caledonia. This will serve to highlight community movement as being key to enhancing social connectedness among vulnerable minorities.

I. THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN HUMAN CONNECTEDNESS

A quick throwback to the role of Hip-Hop and Jazz in African-American communities:

Music is probably not a universal language, but it is a universal practice in one form or another. For some, music will help express grievances; for others, it will help create a sense of belonging, or voice an identity claim. In all cases, music is understood as a tool for social cohesion, but more specifically, for justice. For example, early 20th century jazz and blues artists and 90s hip-hop and rap performers demonstrate how communities used music as a political tool to give voice to grievances and identities. As argued by Becky Blanchard, these genres helped the young, urban, working-class African-American community "bear the racial discrimination and social and economic deprivation that they encountered."[3] Blanchard further explained that "rap music reflects [...] its function as the voice of an otherwise underrepresented group."[4] These new forms of expression still play a crucial role for African-American communities as they serve to further powerful social, economic, and political claims.

Music as a 'social good', music as a right:

Diana Boer noted, "Evolutionary theorists emphasize that one central function of music is to mobilize social cohesion."[5] Similarly, Robert Putnam's theory of social capital in human

---

[3] Verney, Kevern. 2003.
[4] Blanchard, Becky. 1999.
[5] Boer, Diana, and Amina Abubakar. 2014.

development[6] suggests music has the capacity to create social connections. Schulkin et al. emphasized it further, stating that "music [...] allows for unique expressions of social ties and the strengthening of relational connectedness."[7] Moreover, music is also a tool for empowerment. Dave (2014) stated that music creates a "public space in which rights can be locally debated, promoted and protected."[8] However, the success of this approach depends on local understandings of musical function and significance.

The Capability Approach and the notion of functionings at the core of the argument:

Having set out the basic parameters of the relationship between music and social connectedness, we now turn to its place in the framework of the Capability Approach. A. Sen[9] and M. Nussbaum's[10] essays on the Capability Approach offer interesting insights on human development and human rights approaches. Sen has developed the notion of capabilities as a core measurement of human wellbeing, emphasizing the importance of freedom of choice as a way to re-orient policy debates. Here, capabilities are identified as "substantial freedoms, a set of opportunities to choose and to act."[11] Nussbaum establishes a list of core capabilities. In particular, she mentions "the right to senses, imagination and thought."[12] This closely relates to freedom of expression through music. As a result, Nussbaum argues, "a focus on dignity will dictate policy choices that protect and support agency rather than choices that infantilize people."[13]

If we draw this argument back to our work on music, we thus understand the need to leave room for grassroots music in the exercising of human freedom and development,

---

6 See Putnam, Robert, 1999.
7 Schulkin, Jay and Raglan, Greta B. 2014.
8 Dave, N. 2014.
9 Sen, Amartya. 2010.
10 Nussbaum, Martha C. 2013.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.

acknowledging the "conceptualization of music within the capabilities framework."[14] This framework turns us to the core argument of this essay: the generalization of music as being universal undermines the human development approach to human rights through its effect on the true relationship of humans with their freedom of choices. As Dave smartly sums up, "the capabilities approach offers both a theoretical and practical framework and thus provides a more effective way of understanding and imagining music's role in social life."[15]

II. WHEN POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FAIL TO USE THE CAPABILITY APPROACH FRAMEWORK FOR MUSICAL PROGRAMS

Drawing on the Capability Approach as a practical framework, we now turn to current policy analysis. If we look at the policy level, most of the programs that address the 'cultural' significance of development have emphasized the importance of developing the music industry rather than looking at music movements as a form of expression to combat isolation at the community level. Moreover, very little room is left for people to choose their form of expression. As a result, policies are poorly oriented and can only have short-term impacts. In addition, minorities still find themselves stigmatized, marginalized, and further isolated.

UNESCO recognizes that "creativity contributes to building open, inclusive and pluralistic societies,"[16] but recommends that we need to "foster inter-culturality in order to develop cultural interaction in the spirit of building bridges among peoples."[17] The positive value of cultural diversity is acknowledged here as a form of preservation and a way of making full use of culturally appropriate methods of communication, which this paper doesn't dispel; however, very little seems to be said about the power of music in communities and the space needed to re-create social bonds and fight for recognition and respect. As a result, capacity-

---

[14] Dave, N. 2014.
[15] Ibid.
[16] UNESCO website. Protecting our Heritage and Fostering Creativity. Accessed on Dec. 2017.
[17] UNESCO Convention text, Article 1. 2005.

building activities are recognized as important in policy monitoring; however, the approach to development that serves freedom of choice, if we turn back to the Capability Approach, is greatly lacking.

III. FROM UNIVERSALIST PROGRAMS TO GRASSROOTS EMPOWERMENT: A CASE STUDY OF GRASSROOTS APPROACHES TO MUSIC AS A BUILDER OF SOCIAL COHESION AND EMPOWERMENT

This last part assesses the potential of grassroots musical movements in creating honest social connections within and across marginalized communities, while respecting people's voices. As a matter of fact, the shift from universalist to grassroots approaches to music seems ever more crucial today. Dave, in his essay, makes a distinction worth citing: "popular music is hailed for promoting the dream of human rights, rather than for successfully protecting or promoting any particular rights in practice."[18] Indeed, most of the initiatives, such as El Sistema, take for granted the cultural complexities and differences across communities, "thus overlooking the particularities of local music-making and meaning."[19]

The example of Kaneka in New Caledonia:

Kaneka is a perfect example of the power of music in bridging communities and creating a sense of self-worth among members. Created in 1985,[20] Kaneka is a music genre of the Kanak population, comprised of 350 million people in New Caledonia designated as 'Indigenous'. New Caledonia is a small territory belonging to France (since 1853) in the middle of the South Pacific where Kanak have long claimed their rights and their identity. Fighting against cultural assimilation and the exhaustion of their identity, Kaneka music has thus emerged as a peaceful action for social justice and identity claims. Emily Carson notes, "Considering the islands' 300-

---

[18] Dave, N. 2014.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Mastrodicasa, Z. Identités en Nouvelle-Calédonie.

plus Kanak tribes spoke 28 different languages, they decided that a sound was needed to unify them."[21]

While Kaneka is a political and cultural tool, especially for the youth, Kaneka has also helped many Kanak create their own position in their community and find purpose in their society. As Bensigor (2013) explains, "the Afro-American fight has served as a trigger for the Kanak's recognition movement."[22] Moreover, Kaneka has helped Kanak rebuild a sense of belonging in a place where they are most often put aside. Indeed, Kaneka is not only the voice of hope and identity, but it also carries a social virtue for both the community at large and the musicians themselves who have a responsibility in the music group and in their tribe.

The Kassiopée Association, created in 2005 by a collective of artists from the 'Melting Pot' movement, have used Kaneka as a "tool for artistic expression aimed at promoting cultural actions."[23] Here, music helps younger generations of Kanak express themselves through Kaneka. Music groups such as Yata demonstrate these claims. Yata was created in the late 1970s by musicians from different communities across the Kanak population. This group has helped the youth to express their isolation by using Kaneka. Since then, Yata has worked with the Festival des Arts du Pacifique where Kaneka was introduced to the local music scene.

However, Kaneka is under threat of disappearing amidst the process of 'cultural fusion'[24] in the South Pacific. According to Carson, the South Pacific's "relative isolation means that sound has yet to break into the international market."[25] As a result, Kaneka can only be preserved if institutions create policies that aim to give space and opportunities for these communities to build their musical movements as a form of expression, enhancing their sense of belonging and the respect of their tradition.

---

[21] Carson, Emily. 2014.
[22] Bensignor, F. 2013.
[23] Jean-Marie Ganeval in Mastrodicasa, Z. 2017.
[24] Mastrodicasa, Z. 2017.
[25] Carson, Emily. 2014.

IV. WHAT STAKEHOLDERS CAN TAKE FROM THIS ESSAY

The core message of this essay is that musical projects at the community level must be supported in the furtherance of social connectedness. By this, the paper argues that fostering cultural diversity does not necessarily mean creating music-based educational programs for vulnerable or underprivileged children. Naturally, these programs have had amazing contributions in the short-term, but I believe in the necessity to draw back to grassroots' voices to create meaningful projects that will enhance social connectedness. As a result, one must look at removing the barriers to performing and creating personal or community music. As Dave argues, "Space and resources should be provided for ongoing, informal music, allowing for social cohesion to build amongst groups."[26]

CONCLUSION

This essay has thus attempted to show how community-level musical movements could help enhance capabilities across and within the most vulnerable communities. As illustrated in the case of Kaneka in New Caledonia, music can be a very powerful political and social tool to combat exclusion and feelings of loneliness and under-recognition. Kaneka collectives show the immense power of music in bridging minorities when started from the grassroots. However, building effective support at the government and global level is extremely hard because the call for social justice itself can disrupt the status quo.

This essay emphasizes how important it is for individuals, groups, and communities to be the actors of their own recognition path and dignity. The example of the Kaneka provides a good basis for the building of social connectedness, but this essay is but a first step to helping stakeholders at the broader level to work together with targeted populations. This essay can

---

[26] Dave, N. 2014.

give NGOs and intra- and inter-governmental initiatives a way to re-assess their impact. Stakeholders need to change their attitudes towards music, viewing it less as a universal asset and more as a local one. Indeed, music is not a "blank space on which meanings can be easily imposed."[27]

Moreover, stakeholders must avoid the 'catharsis' approach to musical projects because vulnerable minorities are seeking long-term recognition. As Nussbaum emphasized, the Capability Approach view "attempts to situate the approach in the narrative context of human lives, showing how it makes a difference to what policy-makers notice in these lives."[28] This will hopefully stimulate a discussion on the potential of music in protecting cultural identities while promoting human capabilities. As Dave states, "Through such research and inquiry, music's interaction with social life in particular contexts could be better understood."[29]

---

[27] Dave, N. 2014.
[28] Nussbaum, Martha C. 2013.
[29] Dave, N. 2014.

WORKS CITED

Bensignor, F. *Naissance du kaneka*, Hommes et migrations: migrations et mondes ruraux. Cité Nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration. 2013. Web.

Blanchard, Becky. *The Social Significance of Rap & Hip-Hop Culture*. Poverty & Prejudice: media and race. EDGE, Standford University Website. 1999. Web.

Boer, Diana, and Amina Abubakar. *Music Listening in Families and Peer Groups: Benefits for Young People's Social Cohesion and Emotional Well-Being across Four Cultures*. Frontiers in Psychology, vol. 5, Aug. 2014. Web.

Carson, Emily. *Be More Pacific: Can Kaneka Bring New Caledonia Together*? The Guardian, Guardian News and Media. 2016, Web.

Dave, N. *Music and the Myth of Universality: Sounding Human Rights and Capabilities*. Journal of Human Rights Practice. Oxford University Press. 2014. Web.

Mastrodicasa, Z. *Identités en Nouvelle-Calédonie*. Institut d'Études Politiques des Lyon. Université 2 Lyon. 2007. Web.

Musicians without Borders website. *Why Music?* section. Accessed on Dec. 2017. Web.

Music for Global human development's website - Canadian Centre for ethnomusicology at the University of Alberta. Accessed on Dec.2017. Web.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. Print.

Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*. Journal of Democracy, Volume 6. 1999. Web.

Schulkin, Jay and Raglan, Greta B. *The Evolution of Music and Human Social Capability*. Frontiers in Neuroscience. 2014, Web.

Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Anchor, 2010. Print.

UNESCO. *Protecting our Heritage and Fostering Creativity*. Accessed on Dec. 2017. Web.

UNESCO. *2005 Convention text*. 2005. Accessed on Dec. 2017. Web.

Verney, Kevern. *African Americans and US Popular Culture*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2003. Web.