

Musical Harmony: Teaching Peace and Tolerance through Music in a Conflict-Ridden Society
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Peace is the coexistence of different identities and lifestyles together with an understanding, awareness and tolerance of the “other.” This understanding and tolerance of identities and lifestyles different from one’s own comes from creating a culture that cherishes diversity, encourages empathy and allows creativity and change to occur. In Pakistan peace is primarily threatened by a new wave of religious fundamentalism that challenges traditional cultural, religious, and social identities and customs through enforcing a rigid intolerance and fear of diversity and creative expression. This is expressed by violent bombing of traditional Sufi shrines, burning of music shops, suicide bombing at theaters, banning of traditional syncretic religious festivals, and opposing creativity and art. Furthermore, Pakistan’s rich musical tradition has also been under political, economic and social threats and is on the brink of extinction. Preserving and popularizing folk musical traditions not only creates a richer cultural landscape but also promotes a cultural heritage of peace, diversity and moderation. Pakistani Sufi and other indigenous music is a cultural force that inculcates values that promote peace, harmony, tolerance, kindness and non-violence. This musical tradition is a potent and culturally resonant tool to resist the brutalizing influence of extremist militant ideologies that distort cultural, religious and national identities in order to create violent intolerance.

The Institute for the Preservation of Arts and Culture (IPAC) is a relatively new and dynamic local grass-roots organization in Pakistan located in the capital, Islamabad that understands the importance of local arts and music to the long-term stability, peace and sanity of Pakistani culture and society. IPAC has been working hard to document the different indigenous musical traditions of Pakistan and it has raised awareness about how the rich musical traditions of Pakistan are in a precarious state. This awareness building is coupled with public musical events in order to re-ignite the passion and interest of Pakistanis, especially the youth, towards indigenous music. Recently, IPAC has also started a novel educational program, called “Schools of Harmony,” at a local private school in Islamabad to teach children (primary, middle and high school) an appreciation of the beauty, diversity and history of indigenous musical traditions.

The Project

I intend to collaborate with IPAC in order to build on their already successful model of exposing school-age children to the rich musical heritage of Pakistan and teaching them to appreciate and learn from the unique, tolerant and ecumenical message and philosophy of the songs and poetry. We will create a summer course designed to familiarize school-age children in Islamabad with indigenous musical instruments (*Sarangi*-old bowed music instrument, Folk instruments like *Bansuri*, *Tabla* etc.) and actual traditional musicians. They will not only hear the songs and performances but will also be encouraged to critically engage with the music, poetry and the socio-cultural values embedded in it. The course will include discussion sessions, presentations, creative activities and debate in order to foster a healthy attitude towards differences of opinions, independent thinking, public speaking, and art.

This will be an intensive two weeks course (Tentative dates: June 25th, 2012-July 5th, 2012) consisting of day-long workshops, lectures, activities and performances with 4 sessions (Mon-Thu) each week. The language of instruction for this course will be Urdu. The course will be offered to 30 urban children taken equally from three different socioeconomic strata: upper-class, middle-class and working-class. The 10 upper-class children will be selected from Headstart School, the 10 middle-class students will be from Khaldunia School, and the 10 working-class children will be from Mashal school. The children will be chosen from grades 5-7 and there will be an equal number of girls and boys from each school. Effort will be made to include religious minority students, like Shi’ite, Ahmadi, Ismaili and Christian students. The number of students will be limited to thirty, as I want a relatively small group that will allow maximum participation, discussion, and interaction as well as provide close attention to each student. In early-April IPAC will work with these three schools to publicize this summer course among the students and open-up the application process, which will be based on an essay that explains

why the student is interested in participating and how this course will help him or her in the future. We will be looking for students who claim to be passionate about music and who show the most potential of utilizing what they learn in the future.

Expected Outcomes

The goals of this summer course are to teach children about the vanishing traditional musical heritage of Pakistan and at the same time promote a cultural discourse, which is currently under threat, that teaches peace and humanity. The children will learn about local values that are progressive and teach tolerance and kindness towards the “others” that contemporary Pakistani society struggles with, like religious minorities and women. The children will also learn specific public speaking skills and understand that disagreements and differences of opinions can not only be tolerated but also cherished. The students will learn how to engage in critical and independent thinking and be allowed to openly express any ideas and beliefs they have. Finally, local professional musicians will be given a source of livelihood and purpose, which will slow down the demise of these art forms and artists.

Future Impact

This summer course will lead to a crop of children who have a passion for the traditional musical heritage and tradition of Pakistan and who have basic knowledge about this genre of music. These students will have the motivation and skills to employ what they have learned in their careers, hobbies and daily lives.

This project will be a novel way to promote a peaceful mindset and ideology together with encouraging creativity and appreciation for local art. The successful implementation of this project is crucial to convince schools to establish a regular music course for their students or to implement similar summer courses. IPAC is committed to use this course as a model to create future courses in other schools and for different socio-demographics. The students who graduate from this course will be asked to write about their experiences and what they learned from the course and these will be placed on the IPAC website in order to inspire and motivate other children to participate in future courses designed similarly. Furthermore, I will document the implementation of the course through photographs and video (employing the services of a video production firm, Media-Bridge) and also write an article for Pakistani newspapers about the experiences of the students and how valuable this course was for them. I intend to use the video footage to create a short documentary that will be publicized in order to spread awareness about folk music and its message of peace and love for all humanity.

The schooling system has neglected traditional cultural heritage and arts for a long time and the implementation, and the resultant awareness of the merits of this program, will create a unique and inspiring model for incorporating Pakistan’s rich musical tradition in order to tackle the disturbing rise in violent militant ideologies.

My Qualifications for Implementing this Project

I have been born and raised in the twin cities of Islamabad/Rawalpindi and hence have an extensive social network that I can tap into in order to implement and publicize this project. I have already worked with IPAC and have a good rapport with the organization. I consider myself well poised to implement this educational program as I have taught as a high school teacher in Islamabad before I came to Columbia University to pursue a master’s degree in psychology. I served as the head of the student social work group at the school I worked in and have supervised and managed students’ social work-related projects. I have made two short documentary films on social issues while pursuing my undergraduate degree. I am currently interning with the American Psychological Association (APA) at the United Nations (UN) and am involved and interested in research, presentations and advocacy related to the value of psychology in promoting peace and understanding between nations. I am passionate about the musical heritage of Pakistan and very concerned about the recent spate of militant violence in Pakistani cities. Hence, I am motivated to use this project as a model and launching pad for the effective use of traditional music and songs as a teaching tool for inculcating peaceful and tolerant values in Pakistani students.