Introduction to "Social justice, human rights, and sustainability of traditional arts"

Editorial

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This special issue of the *International Journal of Traditional Arts* examines intersections between social justice, human rights, and the sustainability of traditional arts. Especially in the couple of decades since UNESCO's *Convention on the Urgent Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), scholars have made concerted efforts to better understand the local and global threats to the vitality and transmission of intangible cultural practices such as music (e.g. Schippers and Grant, 2016) and dance (e.g. Brooks and Meglin, 2014). This intensified interest in cultural endangerment and sustainability has dovetailed with a heightened interest in applied ethnomusicological scholarship (see Pettan and Titon, 2015), whereby researchers aspire for their work to contribute to positive social and cultural change, and improve the life circumstances of individuals, groups, and communities. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, a growing subset of cultural sustainability research examines how certain issues of human rights and/or social justice affect people's ability to practice and otherwise engage with cultural expressions. Scholars have recently explored how the vitality and viability of musical and other intangible cultural expressions intersect with matters of forced migration (e.g. Ruano Posada, 2019), colonisation (e.g. Treloyn and Charles, 2021), war and conflict (e.g. Opiyo, 2015), socioeconomic disadvantage (e.g. Grant, 2016), climate justice (e.g. Harrison, 2020), political censorship and subjugation (Anonymous, 2021), and health equity (e.g. McConnell, 2017), among other topics. By examining local contexts, these case studies offer rich insights into how certain issues of social justice and human rights interlock with cultural sustainability. They build on, and contribute to, the extensive scholarly corpus that more generally investigates intersections of human rights and social justice with music and the other arts (e.g. Bell and Desai, 2014; Fifer et al, 2022; Romero et al, forthcoming).

With a focus on the sustainability of traditional arts, this special issue deepens and expands this body of scholarship. Represented here are music, dance, and theatre traditions from diverse settings and perspectives: the heritage musical practices of an immigrant Nepalese community in Canada (in the article by Subash Giri) and those of war-displaced Syrian children and youth in Turkey (Guilnard Moufarrej); a pot-drum dance of Igbo girls in Nigeria (Ruth Opara); Chinese glove puppetry in Indonesia (Yuan-Hsin Tung and Dwi Woro Retno Mastuti); state-sanctioned folk music and dance in post-war Poland (Katarzyna Skiba); and classicised Indian dance in the United States (Aruna Kharod). Through these case studies, the special issue illuminates some of the complex and sometimes surprising relationships between social justice, human rights, and the sustainability of traditional arts—relationships that scholars have perhaps long recognised, it seems, but only interrogated in a fragmentary way.

This special issue works from the journal's definition of *traditional arts*: "artistic and creative practices that function as a marker of identity for a particular cultural group and that have grown out of their oral tradition or that have been newly created using characteristics derived from oral tradition."[2] However, the authors in this special issue were free to stake out their own interpretations of *human rights* and *social justice*, and their varying interpretations arguably enrich the contribution

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[2] https://tradartsjournal.ncl.ac.uk/index.php/ijta/about

of the articles as a set. By nearly any conceptualisation, these two terms cover vast (and overlapping) terrain. Human rights scholar Stephen Hopgood distinguishes upper-case *Human Rights*—a global configuration of laws, courts, organisations, and money—from lower-case *human rights*: devolved, nimbler local and transnational social networks and movements "that aim to ensure that people are treated decently and with respect for their autonomy and integrity" (in Van Troost and Lettinga, 2014, p. 9; cf. Hopgood, 2014, p. 11). Social justice too can be understood in at least two ways: as relating to narrower concerns about the social distribution of resources, opportunities, and other benefits; and to broader considerations about how those with less power are treated by those with more, or even more simply, whether people recognise the humanity of others and treat them with "everyday kindness" (Rinehart, Barbour and Pope, 2014, p. 5). The articles in this special issue vary in their positioning along one or both continua. Aruna Kharod, for example, engages a narrower distributive understanding of social justice in critiquing funding practices for cultural safeguarding, while Subash Giri adopts a more expansive definition to advocate for collaborative, respectful, and equitable practices by researchers towards the minority (or minoritized) groups they work with. As a set, though, the six articles in this special issue lean towards the lower-case understanding of *human rights* and a broad human-centred understanding of *social justice*, each of which perhaps aligns most easily with contemporary ethnomusicological interests and approaches.

With more people currently forcibly displaced from their homeland than at any other time since World War Two, the cultural lives of refugees and people seeking asylum are crucially relevant to understanding the dynamics of cultural sustainability around the world. In her article "Protection and sustainability of traditional music among war-displaced Syrian youth: The case of Nefes Music School in Gaziantep, Turkey," **Guilnard Moufarrej** examines how sustaining the traditional music of displaced populations can contribute to improving human rights, including by helping people to process trauma and loss and maintain their cultural identities, and by cultivating intercultural understanding about and among the host community. Through digital ethnography, Moufarrej explores the case of a music program in Turkey, which she argues is advancing the cultural rights and social inclusion of the Syrian children and youth refugee participants. Her article illustrates how keeping traditional arts strong can ameliorate social conditions for people and communities—indeed, how sustaining traditional arts practices is *itself* a matter of human rights and social justice.

Cultural sustainability initiatives, human rights, and social justice are not always straightforwardly or positively correlated, though, especially when power imbalances (such as class and rural-urban divides) are involved. In her article "The role of 'Mazowsze' State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble in the post-war revival of folk music and dance in Poland," **Katarzyna Skiba** examines how the Polish State's efforts to revive traditional music and dance after the Second World War were enmeshed with political agendas and policies aiming to broaden educational and cultural access and participation. By tracing the development and eventual professionalisation of the ensemble Mazowsze through various post-war social changes, Skiba illustrates how folk music and dance were recontextualised from their peasant origins to the national and international stage—and how, through their institutionalisation, they came to represent Polish national culture and identity. Her essay engages with important issues of agency, participation, rights, and privileges, including who "owns" traditional arts, who decides how they are sustained or revitalised, and how both these matters interlock in complex ways with wider social, political and cultural settings and agendas.

Sometimes, traditional arts practices themselves are entangled with human rights violations and social injustices. In her article "Music and the African girl child: Gender-based violence, resistance, and sustainability in pot drum dance," **Ruth Opara** examines how girls of Igbo ethnicity in southeastern Nigeria resist gender-based violence through their practice of the dance *Avu Udu*. Growing up as an *Avu Udu* practitioner, Opara experienced first-hand how traditional cultural practices like *Avu Udu* serve to shape girls in line with oppressive gender norms. Arguing that the future of *Avu Udu* fundamentally depends on the trajectory of conventional patriarchy in Igbo society, Opara emphasises how the resilience, resistance, and creativity of the Igbo girl practitioners, along with rapidly changing socioeconomic and political conditions in Nigeria, open up new possibilities for the tradition to evolve in ways that advance, rather than limit, gender rights and gender justice.

In her contribution "Far from forgotten: Bharatanatyam, cultural infrastructure, and enacting equity in US-based folklife apprenticeship programs," **Aruna Kharod** takes social justice in its most customary sense, as referring to the fair and equitable social distribution of funding and resources. Kharod interrogates how the practices and decisions of cultural grant-making organisations may inadvertently work against fairness and equity, even while advancing their cultural sustainability goals. From her standpoint as practitioner of *Bharatanatyam* (Indian classicized dance) in the USA, and former recipient of a state apprenticeship program grant to further her creative practice in that tradition, Kharod describes *Bharatanatyam* in the USA as an elite minority tradition that already enjoys relatively strong resourcing and infrastructure. Organisations aiming to support 'at-risk' minority cultural practices, Kharod contends, should adopt a more nuanced, critical, and equitable approach to their grant-making: one that better accounts, for instance, for the many linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and intersectional factors that bolster or hinder the capacity of individuals or groups to apply for, and secure, grant funding.

Like that by Kharod, the article by **Subash Giri** examines ethical processes and practices surrounding interventions in the sustainability of traditional arts. In "Participatory ethnomusicology: An epistemic approach to social justice, human rights, and the sustainability of the traditional arts of minorities," Giri urges scholars to consider 'participatory ethnomusicology' as a useful methodological and epistemic approach in supporting minority traditional arts. Noting that human rights violations and social injustices disproportionately affect the lives and cultural practices of minoritized peoples, and drawing on principles from applied ethnomusicology and Participatory Action Research, Giri urges for minority groups to have full agency and control over cultural sustainability initiatives that involve them. He exemplifies the 'participatory ethnomusicology' model through a cultural sustainability endeavour he carried out with the Nepalese community of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, where the community played the leading role in conceiving, implementing, and evaluating the project.

As Giri mentions, minority groups often face a raft of social challenges; exploring new directions for traditional arts practices can sometimes be a means for those groups to advocate for, and advance, their social inclusion and rights. In their article "Revitalizing *Potehi* practice: Preservation, innovation, and transmission by Rumah Cinwa in Contemporary Indonesia," **Yuan-Hsin Tung** and **Dwi Woro Retno Mastuti** consider the case of *Wayang Potehi* (Chinese glove puppetry) in Indonesia, which like other ethnic Chinese traditional arts fell afoul of assimilation policies during Suharto's long regime at the end of the twentieth century. The authors propose that a new acculturated form of *Wayang Potehi* practiced by the contemporary troupe Rumah Cinwa embodies a kind of multicultural conciliation, moderating long-standing antagonism between ethnic groups and facilitating social understanding between new practitioners from diverse backgrounds. The innovations of the troupe are also attracting a younger generation of practitioners, thereby forging new possible futures for a waning tradition in Indonesia.

These six articles by no means traverse all facets of the relationship of the sustainability of traditional arts to human rights and social justice. How do international human rights instruments support (or inhibit) efforts to sustain the traditional arts? What are the roles, responsibilities, and limits of cultural sustainability initiatives in advancing human rights and/or social justice? What are the ethics of sustaining traditional arts practices whose connection to social justice and human rights principles are questionable? Yet even from this small foray, it seems possible to draw some useful insights: that vibrant and viable traditional arts practices can be formidable instruments in the pursuit of social justice and human rights, but can also work against them; that human rights violations and social injustices can threaten the sustainability of traditional arts, but perhaps counterintuitively also underpin them; and that local, regional, and national cultural sustainability initiatives and interventions can have beneficial, but also multifaceted and complex, ramifications for human rights and/or social justice. In this way, this special issue offers a glimpse into some important practical, ethical, and methodological implications of its vast topic. Over time, further critical scholarship on the sustainability of traditional arts, social justice, and human rights should lead to theories to better describe and understand the nuances of their relationships. In turn, these theories could help arts

practitioners and communities, non-government organisations, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders design and implement more effective initiatives to support the sustainability of traditional arts. Arguably even more importantly, these new understandings might also help stakeholders be more strategic about the potential for vibrant and viable traditional arts practices—and initiatives to maintain and support them—to improve, in some small way, the rights, freedoms, opportunities, and life prospects of individuals, groups, and communities around the world.

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