A cosmopolitan culture-bearer as activist: Striving for gender inclusion in Nepali music education

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Abstract
Although music education scholars have increasingly advised teachers to take heed of values, principles, and strategies of musical practices outside of school, very little has been written in music education regarding the ideological underpinnings of musical practices in these contexts. This article argues that musical practices outside of school do not necessarily provide ideal models to be directly applied in the music classroom, but need to be critically examined and transformed to better align with global imperatives such as inclusiveness. In addressing the imbalance between “inauthentic” learning in school and “authentic” learning outside of school, this article shows how working toward the global ideal of gender inclusion may require radical activism and a cosmopolitan approach countering the right of an ethnic group to practice and preserve their own distinctive culture. The life story of a Newar musician from the Kathmandu Valley is used to illustrate this argument by demonstrating what it takes for a “culture-bearer” to initiate radical processes of social change and transformation. In this qualitative narrative case study, we asked what kind of context-specific, socio-cultural negotiation was required to overcome the challenges the musician faced in including girls and women in musical learning in a Newar community.

Keywords
Music education, Nepal, activism, cosmopolitanism, life story, inclusion

Introduction
In recent years, music education scholars around the world have increasingly pointed out the possible inauthenticity of the ways of teaching and learning music in school (see, e.g. Green, 2001,
Teachers have been advised to take heed of values, principles, and strategies of musical practices outside of school in order to help their students develop reflective thinking “in relation to practice-specific musical knowing” (Elliott, 1995, p. 55). School music that has been accused of “methodolatry” (Regelski, 2002) or overly theory- and notation-based Western approaches to learning music (Volk, 1998) is said to provide more limited meanings than those taking place in people’s everyday lives. While music education in formal settings has certainly earned some of this criticism, very little has been said in music education about the possible ideological sides of out-of-school learning environments and how they may equally limit learning possibilities and students’ agency. To balance this widely documented, perhaps typically Western, dichotomy between “narrow,” “inauthentic” learning in school and “meaningful,” “authentic” learning outside of school (see the critique toward this polarization in Allsup, 2012 and Folkestad, 2006), in this article, we use a case study from Nepal to demonstrate how musical traditions should not be viewed as merely musical practices, but also as social practices, and how dealing with global imperatives toward inclusiveness may be just as important in traditional and non-formal out-of-school settings as in schools. We argue that musical practices outside of school do not necessarily automatically provide ideal models to be directly applied in the music classroom, but need to be critically examined and possibly changed to better align with such global visions that take into account social issues, such as gender equality.

This article aims (1) to illustrate how the global vision for inclusiveness (UNESCO, 2005) may require radical activism and a visionary cosmopolitan mindset that paradoxically may act against the right of an ethnic group to practice and preserve their own distinctive culture; and (2) to show what it takes for a traditional musician, a “culture-bearer,” to deal with not only practice-specific musical knowing, but also radical processes of social change and transformation in the context of Nepal, one of the most unequal countries in South Asia (Lawoti, 2007, p. 25).

In order to illustrate the need for an activist approach for socially transformative music education, we portray this traditional musician as a “cosmopolitan culture-bearer” who is able to reflect on his community’s musical tradition not only from within but also in relation to other musical traditions, and who acts as a change agent (Zeichner, 1993) to preserve tradition whilst simultaneously aiming to transform his music culture. This musician’s activism is depicted as “cosmopolitanism from below” (Appadurai, 2013, p.198): it begins close to home and builds on the local practices, “but is imbued with a politics of hope that requires the stretching of the boundaries of the everyday in a variety of political directions” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 198). It builds toward solidarities and change “through an irregular assortment of near and distant experiences and neither assumes nor denies the value of its universality” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 198). It strategically extends local cultural horizons, “not in order to dissolve or deny the intimacies of the local, but in order to combat its indignities and exclusions” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 198). In this kind of cosmopolitanism, changing musical practices is not simply seen to stem from “musical innovativeness,” but rather from wider social and political goals that are taken as necessary in the local sphere. Indeed, musical practices can be seen as social practices and thus also social systems (Luhmann, 1995) where musicianship is “anchored in the contexts and purposes of specific musical practices” (Elliott, 1995, p. 68). As Elliott argues, music education deals with “the standards and traditions of practice that ground and surround a particular kind of music-making and listening” (p. 63). Yet, it is precisely because of the structural social nature that these musical practices may resist the transformation toward inclusiveness that some people actively seek. Theoretically, the study is therefore located in “music education praxis,” which refers to not just any musical action or community practice in/out of school that follows musical principles, but such musical and music-related activities that lead to structural social change within the realm of these practices (see, Nabudere, 2008, p. 67; see
also Westerlund, 2002, pp. 210–212), in this case gender inclusion in local Nepali musical practices. By activism, we refer equally to individual interests, emotions, and ethical commitments, as to the broader reflective perspective on social issues (Calhoun, 2008), and to the establishment of “local–global collaborations to promote work being conducted in the local communities” (Nabudere, 2008, p. 72). Hence, although being about activist music education, this study can also be understood as activist scholarship in itself, as it attempts to appreciate the insights of non-scholars; to analyze efforts and struggles toward inclusion; to make an effort to learn from the experience of an activist; and to show how the world can be changed through visions and action (Calhoun, 2008).

Implementation of the case study

Stemming from the aforementioned theoretical interest, this narrative inquiry (e.g. Barrett & Stauffer, 2009; Clandinin, 2006; Webster & Mertova, 2007) presents an understanding of the lifelong efforts of the distinguished musician Mr Nuchhe Bahadur Dangol and his striving for a revitalized, and what we understand as socially just and gender-inclusive Nepali music culture. Mr Bahadur’s life story is used as a practical illustration (see, Atkinson, 2007, p. 224) of activism in music education. It is in this way that the study can be viewed as an instrumental case study (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). In alignment with our overall research task we approached the data with the following question: What kind of context-specific, socio-cultural negotiation was required from the culture-bearer in order to overcome challenges related to the inclusion of girls and women in musical learning and public performance in a Newar community in Nepal?

As part of a larger development project, this case study is based on an attempt to understand the challenges faced by the emerging Nepali music education system from the perspective of the country’s cultural diversity and new educational policies that the country plans to implement. We therefore understand our role as researchers as being involved in the negotiations on difference taking place in local communities and organizations (Bickham Mendez, 2008, p. 152) where it is impossible for us to sustain a position of neutral observer. In alignment with the basis of the larger project on music teacher education, we maintain what could be seen as an “observant participation approach” (i.e. “utilization of an existing role to observe aspects of a familiar or unfamiliar setting,” see Skeggs, 1994) in the Nepal Music Center, local schools, and other organizations with whom we collaborate.

Context and the case

The case study comprises our analysis of interviews with Mr Bahadur, a 66-year-old Newar musician from the Kathmandu Valley. We initially met Mr Bahadur through a music teacher education development project conducted as a cross-national collaboration between the Nepal Music Center in Kathmandu and the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki between years 2013–2015. The Sibelius Academy was invited to collaborate with the Nepal Music Center (NMC) in their efforts to plan a music teacher education program as Nepal begins to implement its national music curriculum for schools (Government of Nepal, 2007).

The term ‘Newar’ refers to a fairly complex cultural group of people that speak, besides Nepali, the Tibeto-Burman language of Newari (Bista, 2013, pp. 19–20). The Newar are often considered to be the indigenous “host tribe” of the Kathmandu Valley and the creators of the area’s civilization (e.g. Bista, 2013; Shrestha, 2007). The Newar live in every region of Nepal, and form the majority ethnic group in the Kathmandu Valley, yet, they too have been conquered by other ethnic groups.
Newar culture has been influenced for centuries by various immigrant groups who brought, for instance, the Hindu caste hierarchy to what is believed to have been a predominantly Buddhist culture, and in today’s Newar communities “one’s religion is either Hindu or Buddhist or even both” (Bista, 2013, p. 22).

The Newars are surrounded by deep plurality. The social structure in Nepal is firmly based on class and ethnicity that comprise the basis for hierarchies both within and across communities. The hierarchical social life is complex as the country encompasses more than 100 “indigenous nationalities” (e.g. Shrestha, 2007), 52 castes, 44 ethnic groups, and four other social groups, totaling over 120 languages and seven geographic regions (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p. 9). In this plurality, every ethnic or caste community is a minority in terms of population size, and indigenous people have lost their previous majority status (Bhattachan, 2013, p. 53). Within the imposed Hindu caste system, the Newars have their own caste system and complex urban social structure that they have developed in their original territory (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, pp. 10, 13). This intricate social structure consists of more than two dozen distinct Newar castes (Shrestha, 2007, p. 212) of which the Jyapus (the farmers’ caste) is the biggest and the caste of our interviewee, Mr Bahadur.

According to researchers, today’s Nepalese state with its long history of internal colonization is a construction that has made relatively little effort to promote ethnic equality (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p. 14). The Panchayat “melting pot” political system (1960–1990), introduced by King Mahendra, brought forward a major social revolution in Nepal’s political history that was, however, culturally hegemonic as it imposed the hill “high” castes’ cultural Hindu models on all Nepali people: Nepali were supposed to speak one language and wear the same national costumes, and ethnic and caste associations were banned while individual recognition elevated (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 304; see also Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p. 14). Public discourse promoting rights to ethnic, linguistic, and religious self-determination and autonomy became so intense that such discussions were banned during that period (Bhattachan, 2009, p. 18). This political change and socio-economic transformation affected the Newars the most (Maharjan, 2007, p. 245). The 1990 constitution that defined the state as both bahujatiya (multi-caste, multi-ethnic, multi-national) and Hindu “behind the facade of modernization and development” (Lawoti, 2007, p. 24) created ethnic activism, including women’s movements, until the People’s Movement in 2006 that reclaimed democracy (Lawoti, 2007; see also Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, pp. 307–308). Since then, the domination of the Hindu upper castes has decreased, and the old national anthem that glorified the Hindu King was replaced (2006) by one that recognizes diversity (Lawoti, 2013b, p. 246). Importantly, Newar activism, the fighting against discrimination of their language, culture, and Buddhist religion (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p. 13), developed forms of reflection on their collective identity before other ethnic groups (Lecompte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 309; Shrestha, 2007, pp. 199–200). Since 2006, identity politics in Nepal has rapidly changed the dynamics of ethnic and nationalist movements and led to new kinds of political identity and group-based demands where Monarchy and the Hindu State no longer form the self-evident foundation of national integration, as it continued to do following the 1990 constitution (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013).

Issues of exclusion and inclusion affect every segment of Nepali society, hence they also permeate musical practices. The Newar collective ethnic identity is supported by music and, typically, each Newar community has their own musical traditions and instruments. Although women are not excluded from ritualistic practices as such, musical associations in Newar society have traditionally been “characterized by their intransigent anti-feminism,” restricting women from both learning and practicing music (Toffin, 2007, p. 399). However, as the Newar researcher Grandin (2011) notes, gender barriers have been reduced during the past decades. Due to a gradual breakdown of the taken-for-granted norms of a patriarchal society, the traditionally strictly male task of music-making has slowly been opened up to women, as is also illustrated in Mr Bahadur’s life story.
This process of gender inclusion parallels wider cultural adaptation into the globalizing world and increasing professionalism. Musical specialization and stage performances for an audience are latecomers to Newar communities (Grandin, 2011). Traditionally, music has been performed informally at home and in neighborhoods, or on special occasions, such as ritual ceremonies and festivals that are an essential part of the Hindu–Buddhist mixed religious Newar culture. Hinduism and Buddhism also co-exist in Mr Bahadur’s personal life as well as in his community. In some areas, traditional musicians have given up their caste-defined tasks “often associated with caste restrictions and social stigma” in the community, and the “ascribed musicians” have been replaced by other musicians, referred to as “achieved musicians” by Tingey (1994, p. 428). The caste restrictions and social stigmas associated with traditional musical practices do not necessarily apply to those who play Western instruments (Tingey, 1994, p. 428) and in general the new generation tends to be more interested in Western popular culture and Indian cinema than in their own music and culture (Shrestha, 2007, p. 214). Today’s Newar musical life thus faces a hybrid reality: the rapidly modernizing metropolitan life with its new musical genres, and the life of traditional Newar communities in which music has been a central element (Grandin, 2011).

Data collection

This article is based on the research material that we collected over a period of approximately 1.5 years during 2013–2015. The data consists of six topical interviews that can be understood to comprise a biographical life story; this interview-compiled narrative approach has indeed been suggested for understanding the process of producing an activist stance (Gellner, 2011, p. 71). The interviews (ranging from one to one-and-a-half hours each) took place as open discussions between the interviewee, us (two researchers), and an interpreter. Only a few predetermined questions and themes directed the interviews. The final two interviews primarily focused on thematic contextual clarifications of the story. Observations of Mr Bahadur’s teaching and performances, and additional audiovisual and other available materials (such as a 90-minute documentary film produced by NMC on Mr Bahadur’s life, and literature on Nepal and Newars) were used to generate interview questions, supplement the interview material, and validate our interpretations.

Although the interviewee does speak some English, it was jointly decided that we would recruit an interpreter-moderator to give the interviewee the freedom to express himself in his mother tongue. The interpreter is fluent in both Nepali and English, and is also relatively familiar with the context, us, and the interviewee, as she works for Nepal Music Center (see, Liamputtong, 2011, pp. 132–133). In the case of possible misunderstandings, the interpreter would ask further questions, or reformulate our initial question. We aimed to strengthen internal consistency (as experienced by the interviewee) by drawing a timeline comprising the various stages of the interviewee’s life, and by returning to the same topics several times. The research focus emerged and was refined: 1) during the six interviews by moving constantly between different themes; and 2) between the interviews by using our primary interpretations after each interview and interaction (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, pp. 259, 261). The interviews were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed and translated into English by the interpreter. The transcriptions and research literature were used in planning the following interviews and in producing secondary interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000).

Data analysis

As is typical within narrative research (e.g. Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Kelchtermans, 1994; Webster & Mertova, 2007), the study is based on the understanding that people strive to make sense of, interpret, and give meanings to happenings in their lives by binding together and arranging their
experiences into stories. As Atkinson points out, “a life story gives us a vantage point from which to see how one person experiences and understands life … over time,” and enables us to “identify threads and links that connect one part of a person’s life to another” (1998, p. 126).

Although stories, or accounts, are often sequential and language based, in this study they are viewed in wider terms than merely as “stories presented” (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 10). According to Barrett and Stauffer, stories may refer to the continuum of narrative as a “mode of knowing” with its connections to meaning making and a “method of inquiry” (2009, p. 10). It is in this sense that we understand stories as providing a way for the researcher to become “more aware of the range of possible roles and standards that exist within a human community” and to “confirm experience through the moral, ethical, or social context of a given situation” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 129). In general, life stories are worth sharing (Atkinson, 1998, p. 131), and not only is Mr Bahadur’s life story unique, but it also opens a window to the life of a whole community in Nepal. In choosing to tell this particular life story, we agree with Atkinson that there is a need to “hear the life stories of individuals from underrepresented groups” and, in this way, to “help establish a balance in the literature” (1998, p. 130). Yet, as every interview account, this life story has also been framed “in a politically conscious manner” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 268), in this case, as a counter-hegemonic story to the traditional community life in question.

Rather than separating the data into constituent parts by identifying general themes, the focus of the analysis was to synthesize the research material consisting of all the available data into a new story, “an emplotted narrative” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). In this reconstruction process, the three dimensions of the narrative inquiry space (Clandinin, 2006) were considered: the personal/social interactions of Mr Bahadur; continuity (considerations of the past, present, and future of his life); and situations referring to information about the context, time, and place. Through this configurative process of emplotment, we recreated the narrative, synthesizing disconnected data elements – including interviews, observations, and our understanding of the social and cultural context obtained from the literature, audiovisual material, and discussions with the locals – into a coherent story. In this way, as remarked by Polkinghorne (1995), the configured or emplotted happenings take on narrative meaning. Although the analysis is a construction made by us, the researchers, it was constructed in dialogue with Mr Bahadur. The interview transcriptions as well as the emplotted narrative were reviewed and verified by him with the help of the interpreter, and, consequently, minor changes and clarifications were made during this process. We also discussed the final research report with him. Excerpts of the thematic thread, a plot, are presented in the words of Mr Bahadur, as translated by the interpreter. Editing of the original interview transcription has been done only to delete repetition and clearly extraneous information in order to make the plot more easily readable (see, Atkinson, 1998, p. 131).

**Ethical considerations**

It is impossible to avoid issues of power in the processes of conducting research in “majority world” (Akkari & Dasen, 2008) contexts. One can always ask what good follows from “giving voice” through research. For instance, Lather (2007) has pointed out the pitfalls of these kinds of romantic aspirations in ethnographic traditions, and reminded us that there is a fine line between giving voice to the voiceless and manipulation, violation, and even betrayal (p. 483). In this study, we have deliberately chosen the narrative life story approach in order to maintain the interviewee’s voice through the plot. Interpretation took place through the choices we as researchers made in contextualizing the life story, although our interpretations were also discussed with the interviewee. According to Liamputtong (2008), the most important moral–ethical question when including historically marginalized people in research is its relevance to their cultural groups and the likely outcomes of the research (pp. 3–4). Although this study, as part of a larger project, may only bring indirect advantage to Nepalese music education, it can be seen – as life stories of marginalized
paths to teacher activism

Beginnings: “Music was my karma”

Growing up in a culture where music is cultivated and transmitted through the Guru Parampara tradition – organized tuition session with a guru (Grandin, 1994, p. 161) – Mr Bahadur learnt to play the dhimay (percussion set) from his own father.

My father was my teacher, my guru. In our community, we did not write down music and we did not have any certificates in music. My father taught me, and awarded me with a goat’s tongue when I was the best of all. That’s what we still do. Award the best music student with a goat’s tongue.

I was only eight years old when I started earning my living with music. I used to go to the Chowks (market places) and play madal [a Nepali hand drum], dance, sing and make music. And people gave me money for that. My drum was my toy and I played my instrument while others were running after the ball and playing hide-and-seek. For me, my music was my karma, not just for entertainment or for money. These days, there are a few professional musicians – maybe 2 to 3 – in the Jyapu community, but before this generation there were none.

Music has traditionally not been a source of income among the agricultural Jyapu caste who, according to Newar tradition, were the only players of the dhimay (Grandin, 2011, p. 102). Mr Bahadur belongs to the Dangol community within the Jyapu caste, and being one of the few professional musicians in his community he identifies music as his life-calling. His account of an event after breaking his back at an early age describes Mr Bahadur’s sense of music being something he was meant to do in his community.

Then once when I was young I fell off the stage while dancing and broke my back. The King Mahendra took care of my treatment. The doctors inserted a silver plate in my back. I could not move for three months. My plastered body was held together with screws on both hands and feet. One night I was crying in pain, and I begged the doctor to take off the screws for just ten minutes and let me play the madal once. And the doctor let me off for ten minutes. I’ve never experienced such bliss in my life. I played madal and sang ‘til the hospital shook. That night Nateshwor (the dancing form of lord Shiva) appeared to me in a dream. He let me know that I would recover. He said, “You will continue playing music and impart knowledge to everybody. You need not worry.”

Exemplifying gender inclusion within one’s home field

The restricted role of Newar women is deeply embedded in social and cultural practices as well as institutional policies, and stems from an understanding of women’s ritual impurity (Toffin, 2007).
Although Newar women can be seen to be less oppressed than many other women in Nepal, according to Kunreuther (2005), the ancient Newar rituals of ihi and bärhä, which symbolically demonstrate a commitment to the orthodox Hindu status of women, marry prepubescent girls to an immortal god, tempering the “polluting aspects of menstruation throughout a Newar woman’s life” (p. 340). These rites represent “the girl’s true union to the god” and, importantly, reassert girls’ identities as Newar (p. 345):

In my community, women were not allowed to play an instrument because girls were considered impure. Women were not even allowed to touch an instrument. Men used to latch the door and sing, so the women would not hear. In my father’s and grandfather’s generations, women were not even allowed to dance. Men dressed like women and danced. People called women who danced “Randi” – a prostitute. Therefore, music and dance were not taught to girls. And I became a professor at a girls-only college, Padma Kanya College in Tribhuvan University. Isn’t that ironic! I went against the people of my community.

It is noteworthy, that Mr Bahadur’s efforts for changing the culture have proceeded from his most intimate circle toward the wider community, by first including his own female family members in his teaching and then extending the invitation to women outside of his immediate family:

I first taught my sister and then taught my wife to sing and play flute. My sister used to come and sit in my classes. She knew that women were not supposed to play. She learnt for five years, other women had started playing already. Then, more girls from Bhaktapur came. And finally, when it was broadcast on television, many more girls started learning.

This kind of activism, based on the actions of initiating change within one’s own home field and exemplifying it in one’s own life can be understood as a form of “cosmopolitanism from below,” as defined by Appadurai (2013).

**Learning from others**

Mr Bahadur’s journey learning from others started early as his father encouraged him to venture beyond the boundaries of his own neighborhood’s cultural tradition:

When I was young, my father took me to various festivals. We travelled together to fourteen different districts in Nepal to research other people’s music. For several years, I also travelled with my friends, other artists, to different villages and towns. We collected material in order to learn how to play and teach the music accurately.

I learnt to play the madal, but Newar people don’t want to play that instrument. They only want to play their own instruments in their own way – the way they have been taught. The younger generation is more open-minded, but most of the elderly people have this mentality. They protest even more when I share the music with foreigners. They come to my home and yell at me. They have protested strongly. Newar people are also not interested in learning music of other communities.

The cultural protectionism of Jyapus, described by Mr Bahadur, is understandable, since the Newars acknowledge that, in other historical circumstances, their communities, with their own language and highly specialized division of labor, might themselves have constituted a nation (Gellner, 2011, p. 46). Consequently, Newar cultural nationalism with its glorification of Newar civilization and activists seeking autonomy for the Kathmandu Valley as a Newar region within the Nepalese state (Gellner, 2011, pp. 55–56) laid the ground for a strong need for cultural preservation
in the sense of stability and purity against “Nepalization” processes. In this context, Mr Bahadur experienced how his own community excluded him from their practices because of his interest in other people’s music and liberal educational ideas.

According to Lawoti (2013a), it has been the educated elite in Nepal that have been able to mobilize activist formations in their communities: “Literate people can become conscious through reading, listening and analyzing issues” (p. 214). Mr Bahadur has indeed been privileged to receive an education, although he is critical of the lack of higher education opportunities in Nepalese music, which aligns with the general Newar ethnic awareness of Nepal’s subjugated position to India (Grandin, 2011, p. 319):

There was no degree in Nepalese folk music, so the government sent me to India, to Allahabad, to do my bachelor and master’s. Later, I was offered a lecturer post at the university. And, I teach my students to play Nepalese percussion, but I hold a certificate in Indian instruments. I feel bad. There is now a master’s degree in music in Nepal, but that is also in Indian music and Indian instruments. I am protesting about that. Governments in other countries have many provisions for music, but why not in Nepal?

In the interviews, Mr Bahadur often referred to his travels in Nepal and abroad when describing his visions for his own community’s musical life. In this envisioning, Mr Bahadur reflects on the failures of the Newar music culture, the successes of the musical practices of other countries that he has witnessed, and possible new ways to promote Newar culture. Through learning from others, he has developed, what Appadurai (2013) calls, “the capacity to aspire” and “the habit of imagining possibilities, rather than giving in to the probabilities of externally imposed change” (p. 213):

My father never travelled, but I travelled abroad, so I learnt. I got the chance to go to Russia first. Then I went to London twice and to Japan several times to perform. Even Queen Elizabeth invited me to perform for her. I went to Sri Lanka and Europe, to Bulgaria, Poland, and with the money they paid me I bought a ticket to France and performed there. Again, with the money I was paid I got a ticket to Switzerland. I saw how the professors taught their students. I played with foreign musicians and professors. They showed me their notations. I must have travelled for two years, almost. Later, I travelled to different Newar villages and requested the villagers to allow their women and girls to learn music. I showed them pictures and videos of women singing and playing instruments in different countries. I told them about girls in China, London and Japan. Then, I sent my friend to go to villages and teach girls, and slowly it started to develop a little. All my life has been researching, teaching and learning. And I am still learning.

One of the most striking examples of Mr Bahadur’s efforts for gender-inclusion is a choir that brings together both young and elderly Newar women. His idea of intergenerational inclusion in his own community, in the form of a choir that could pass on tradition, came from his interactions with foreigners:

Five years ago, I saw an elderly women’s choir from Norway. They performed at all-girls schools, and also in the Nepal Music Center. And I thought: why aren’t our women performing? So I gathered women – mostly my wife’s friends – and I volunteered to teach them music. I told them I will teach them some of gods’ songs and so I formed this choir, the House Wives’ Choir. Most of the women in the choir don’t know how to read or write. But we train them and we sing. When we sing bhajans at a temple, we also sing songs about various kings who contributed to the temple in some way like Ran Bahadur Shah and also about their life history.

Finding public avenues for inclusive initiatives

Similar to other activists in arts and research, Mr Bahadur has made significant efforts to take women’s music-making to public arenas and to reach a wider audience through the production and
mobilization of ideas (see also, Calhoun, 2008, p. xxi) across social hierarchies in order to establish new practices:

I invited all the students and conducted an orchestra in front of our late king in Hanuman Dhoka. It was the first ever orchestra that I organized – I think in 1998 – and there were girls and boys playing in it. The first time when the girls performed on TV, people were amused. Today, there are many girls involved. I also took the music and dance to different hotels and showcased it in front of the audiences. But still most Newars don’t approve of that. Newari women still don’t perform in hotels. If they were seen performing, their family would come and hold their ears and drag them out!

By taking his female students to perform in public, even in disputed arenas (such as hotels), Mr Bahadur uses the transformative power of art (Beyerbach & Ramalho, 2011) to promote awareness of women’s music-making. Thus, his activist efforts are neither hidden and confined merely to his immediate community, nor are his music-making and teaching practices disconnected from their social context. Rather, Mr Bahadur “strategically extends local cultural horizons” (Appadurai 2013, p. 198) and actively opens up possibilities for women to use art as a process for developing their voices and identities, and utilizes the ability of art to educate by deliberately and publicly challenging unjust conditions and discriminating beliefs.

Including critics in practices

In addition to the abovementioned religious reasons related to ritual purity, men and husbands in the Newar community may also have other arguments to express and justify their opposition to the inclusion of women in musical practices. According to Mr Bahadur, such objections are related to, for instance, a husband’s fear for his wife’s fidelity and concern for his own status as the head of the household, particularly as perceived by other members of the community. Mr Bahadur has found a strategic way to overcome his own community’s fears by inviting husbands to the choir rehearsals. This way, the men have an opportunity not only to see what the women’s music-making looks like in practice, but also to feel included in the activities. Indeed, based on our observations, the House Wives’ Choir rehearsals now form a significant part of community activities. In the rehearsals with Mr Bahadur, we witnessed community musicians accompanying the choir, young girls joining in by singing along in the audience or performing dances with their female relatives, and husbands preparing food and beverages for the participants:

No one has done this before. We go to people’s houses and sing to praise gods. We also want to perform in temples. First, there was only one woman, but now we have over 20 women in the House Wives’ Choir. My aim is to form a choir of 100 women. But it is very difficult. I am trying to invite the husbands to different occasions. I try to explain to the husbands that their attitudes create a barrier to the growth of Nepal and Nepalese music. Right now, I am forming another women’s choir in Manomaiju. I went to this village more than three times to convince them. But finally, I succeeded, and now I have a group of twenty.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have illustrated Mr Bahadur’s activism as being persistent and resolute. While similar changes that strive for gender-inclusion have occurred simultaneously in many other communities in Nepal, this life story illustrates how one individual teacher can advance cultural change. It also shows how socially inclusive pedagogy may resist pressure by the majority of community members even when the sustainability of the community is at stake. Through this instrumental case study, we wish to highlight that music education, like any other artistic and pedagogical practice, is social and thus political, and that music educators, as well as artists and musicians, may take on
an activist role in their societies. As the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe argues, “Artistic practices that aim to (re)organize human coexistence are political, and every artistic act that aims toward a more democratic, inclusive society represents democratic politics in that society” (2007, n.p.). Mr Bahadur’s life story at hand highlights the many challenges, oppositions, and ordeals that can accompany music educator’s grassroots activism. Such activism may arise within localities, but it may also seek deterritorialized ideas, such as gender inclusiveness, as in the case of Mr Bahadur. Intercultural exchange and the crossing of socio-cultural authenticity boundaries may indeed be necessary for such visions to be realized.

As this study shows, traditional music pedagogies can be examined from various angles and may sometimes need critical reconstruction. Or, as Nabudere (2008, p. 81) argues, while “culture matters,” it cannot be fully cultivated without development and social transformation that are the products of a struggle for rights, including the recognition of people’s right to education. Importantly, however, one may ask, who has the right to educational development? As with early anthropological studies (see, e.g. Lewellen, 2002), it has been characteristic for music education scholarship to value the preservation of musical “authenticity” and local traditions in less-developed or post-conflict societies over change. This still prevalent notion of an essentialist and pure tradition and the romanticized notion of experience (see also, Giroux, 1997, p. 249) may not be surprising considering the guilt of Western practitioners and policy-makers whose colonial and intrusive efforts instigated a desire to bring about change in struggling societies. However, educational development, cultural change, and inclusion are not a privilege granted only to the West and North. Musical practices in educational contexts, when understood more as dialogical constructions between different knowledge systems (see also, Nabudere, 2008, p. 76) – such as rituals, religions, the division of labor in social hierarchies – can be transformed whilst subsumed under policy recommendations and wider ethical visions. In this kind of transformative action, futures are rearticulated so that “a collective ‘we’ is created out of a multiplicity of group identities,” such as gender affiliations (Westerlund, 2002, p. 214 referring to Kanpol and McLaren, 1995, p. 9) in our case study.

Finally, understanding the dynamics of heterogeneous, multi-ethnic, multi-religious classrooms in Nepalese schools (Subedi, 2010), one of the main concerns of the music teacher education development project with the Nepal Music Center is acknowledging how music education intersects with global visions for gender inclusiveness and equal rights to education for girls and women. This intersection includes music education as well as visions for inclusive state-nationalism and people-centric identity movements with their justified demands for preserving traditions. In other words, future music teachers in Nepal, as elsewhere, should become reflexive about their important, albeit difficult, role as change agents. Amongst the Newars, according to Shrestha (2007), the need for change is clear: “It is not possible that the Newars will preserve everything of their culture and tradition either, nor is it desirable; … some traditions, for instance domination of women by men and caste discriminations, must be brought to an end” (p. 214). While illustrating one aspect of democratic negotiation in politically and culturally pluralist and hybrid Nepal, the life story of a “cosmopolitan culture-bearer” is hoped to inspire music educators to identify inequalities and take activist stances in their own music education contexts around the globe.

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Notes
1. See the website of the project, http://mcau.fi/nepal/
2. Nepal Music Center (www.nepalmusiccenter.com/) is a non-profit organization in Kathmandu which offers formal music education, organizes music and dance events, and promotes the intangible heritage of Nepal.

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