

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT - EPISODE 1

Culture, Conflict and Mental Health: The Myanmar Case

ASEF Culture360 & culture Solutions

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (00:00)

This is a 2-part podcast jointly produced by culture360.ASEF.org, the arts and culture portal of the Asia-Europe Foundation, and by [culture Solutions](https://culture-solutions.org), an association committed to advancing the understanding of international cultural relations. This podcast is part of [ASEF culture360](https://culture360.ASEF.org)'s "Redefining 'Well-being' through Culture" open call, which explores the multidimensional contributions of culture to physical and mental health, as well as to individual and societal well-being.

My name is Xhesjana Haxhiu, I am a Research Collaborator for [culture Solutions](https://culture-solutions.org) and I'm delighted to host this podcast series titled "Culture, Conflict and Mental Health: the Myanmar case". Let's begin.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (00:47)

Hello and welcome. Today's conversation asks, when communities face conflict and crisis, how does culture become a lifeline for mental health?

Myanmar offers an urgent case study. Following the 2021 military coup, the country has experienced a mental health crisis and a near complete collapse of healthcare infrastructure. Also, mental health policy remains governed by the Lunacy Act from 1912. In this context, communities have turned to culture, music, arts and rituals not as supplement to healthcare, but as primary response to collective trauma.

To understand this better, we have three remarkable practitioners here with us.

Maw Hpray Myar, also called Nene, is a young Karenni violinist who volunteered at a hospital in Myanmar's jungle until it was bombed in 2023, and now brings music to communities through her school.

Lora Ksieniewicz, a US-based humanitarian developing ties with Maw to bridge resources in stable contexts with urgent needs in conflict zones. And Ian Thomas, Head of Arts Research and Insights at the [British Council](https://britishcouncil.org), whose work bridges cultural diplomacy, emergency response and cultural protection globally.

Three different approaches to the same urgent question: How does culture help communities survive, cope and heal?

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (2:10)

Maw, Lora, Ian – welcome and thank you for being here with us today.

Maw Hpray Myar (Nene) (2:11)

Hi.

Lora Ksieniewicz (02:13)

Thank you for having us.

Ian Thomas (02:15)

Yeah. Thank you for having us. Looking forward to it

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (2:18)

So Maw, your journey from volunteering in a hospital to founding a music school after that hospital was bombed is really, really incredible. What made you turn to music as a form of resistance and healing?

Maw Hpray Myar (Nene) (02:31)

For me, music is not just something to enjoy, but it is a way to inspire myself and to really listen to others. When there's no one here to hear you, it is to feel lost. In those moments, we need something that makes us feel a bit more comfortable. Whenever I feel like I have no one to lean on, I turn to music, composing sound, playing instruments or just listening to it gives me courage.

I used to work in a hospital and with NGO and local armed groups. After the bombing, I ended up in an IDP [internally displaced person] camp and that's when I met so many young people who had lost hope. I worked in a war zone and ran away myself. I'm also a survivor of human trafficking. I know very well what it feels like to have no hope.

Seeing them reminded me of my younger self. Music is more than my escape. It is how I heal my heart. Eventually, I started reaching out to them through music. We sang together, we talked and sometimes we even cried together. Those moments showed me how music is able to really touch our emotions and help us connect with each other.

When I decided to help them do music, I wanted to focus on young people around 15 to 18. They are at such an important age, and I wanted to give them a space to feel heard, supported and hopeful. When I tried to use music, culture and tradition to support young people, I got much criticism. In my community, people don't really focus on our mental wellbeing. I believe we should not forget our mental and emotional health and also our culture.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (04:31)

Thank you very much. That was such an inspiring story and I am so glad that you chose to share it with us. Ian, let's shift to the institutional perspective. So the [British Council Cultural Protection Fund](#) and Culture in Crisis work operates at an institutional level, working with governments, international frameworks and formal programmes. My question to you is how does an institution like the [British Council](#) think about culture and mental health in conflict zones and, consequently, how can that positively influence Asian-European cultural relations?

Ian Thomas (05:12)

Many thanks for the question, Jess. So just a little bit as an opening, just a little bit about the [Cultural Protection Fund](#). The [Cultural Protection Fund](#) is run by the [British Council](#). It runs across 18 different countries in places such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and it funds projects, both tangible and intangible heritage, to protect them from conflict,

from war, from the impact of climate change or both. And it's been running now for 10 years since 2016.

So it looks at culture and heritage as a protective factor. It's a stabilising force in a crisis such as climate or conflict. It helps cultural identity by providing continuity, when everything else collapses around it locally. It allows for community-led cultural activity, it supports belonging, agency and meaning. It supports cultural participation in local communities, reducing isolation, strengthening social bonds, supporting recovery during conflict, building resilience, community resilience, community cohesion, social cohesion.

And it also, cultural protection as trauma-informed practice, so "do no harm", is embedded across all our development work, building local agency, local voice, people-centred approaches to local communities, supporting local communities to tell their own stories through heritage, through tangible and intangible heritage. And through that, heritage and culture as a bridge in international cultural relations, so that cultural relations approach, that mutuality, co-creation, long-term approach that the [British Council](#) takes across all its work, across education, arts, and its English work, that mutuality at the heart, that people-centred, locally-led approach to its work. So how does that translate to practitioners on the ground? How we can support more trauma-aware approaches, how we build that "do no harm" approach in our work?

How we build peer support networks, peer learning networks, creating those safe spaces to share values and conversations in local communities in quite fragile contexts. How we connect not just projects, but peer networks, learning partnerships, learning networks, those co-created peer support networks locally and how we connect them through a cultural relations approach to the global. How do we build evaluation approaches that capture the voice of local communities, local voice and those practitioners, and also how we put practitioners' wellbeing and resilience at the heart of our cultural relations approach.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (07:41)

Thank you very much, Ian. That is really important and relevant for the conversation.

So what we're hearing right now is about grassroots necessity on one side, institutional frameworks on the other. Lora, your work seems to bridge these two worlds in a really creative way. Could you describe to us how you conceptualised this need to fill that space and how it made sense to you to interact with artists in these conflict zones?

Lora Ksieniewicz (08:08)

I come from a space where we teach wellness and tools for managing our nervous systems and managing trauma through yoga and Buddhist meditation. It's really important to us that we kind of put the rubber to the road, that we practice in the larger world and how we're moving through the world together, all of these principles that are also beneficial and calming on a personal level.

The practices of yoga and Buddhism were not meant to be something that we just use for ourselves and then sort of end of sentence, right? We're meant to lean into the principles of interdependence and the fact that we're all living in a world together where our actions impact one another on the local level and on a global level.

I am in the private sector with that, of course, but we bring in this role of social responsibility and how we're going to carry that forward. I've been looking over the

years—I started out as a conflict photojournalist trying to bring awareness to difficult situations around the world.

A lot of when we look at, like, how are we going to continue to fund projects in the humanitarian sector? A lot of the thought is, well, we have to look more to the private sector to get involved. We're getting less and less government funding. We're getting less and less sort of big organisational funding. And so we look to the private sector for that.

I have created a wellness programme that is adjacent to Nene's work with the music and gives folks that are already getting these nervous system benefits from the art, from the music, from this collaboration and then gives them even more grounding and practical tools to manage through breathwork, through visualisation, meditation, and through some basic mindfulness tools.

And so the way that I've created this programme and to sort of be this bridge between the two sectors is that the wellness programme and benefits for the beneficiaries are free to access and they're tools that we're rolling out in, say, IDP [internally displaced person] camps or in refugee communities or places where people have experienced the conflict.

And then there's another side to the programme that is facing the benefactors. We all deal with a stressful and chaotic and unpredictable world. Of course, we do not experience this world in the same way, and we do not have the same level of trauma from how we live. But we all struggle, we all suffer. That's another one of those foundational principles of Buddhist meditation and yoga is really recognising the universality of our experience.

It also, it's not just a sort of ideological bridge. That's my main thought. It's that I want to lessen the divide between benefactor and beneficiary. And also just really recognise that this is a shared experience, that our humanity is a shared experience, that dealing with life and its challenges is a shared experience. And so it's a financial bridge, but it's also a sort of compassionate and ideological bridge between what can seem like folks living in completely different experiences in completely different worlds.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (11:30)

Thank you very much Lora. That is really fascinating how you're trying to not be just ideological in this bridge, but you're actually trying to do something concrete to help communities in conflict zones.

So far we're seeing these three distinct approaches that address different parts of the same challenge. Now I would like to bring all of you into conversation. So each of you represents a different piece of the puzzle. Grassroots practice, institutional support and this sustainable funding in the in-between space.

What do you think, what can your approach learn from the others? Maw, what do you think—what would institutional support or different models of funding make possible for your work?

Maw Hpray Myar (Nene) (12:19)

If we get more support, we can do more, I think. Without help and support, it's difficult for us to continue. We could have those young people better help with the help from different institutions. In fact, we need all the help we could get. We are doing this not

because we have all the resources, but because we believe we need to do something for those young people. So we need all the support and the platforms and networks to raise awareness of our cause.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (12:54)

Thank you Nene. Ian, what does the [British Council](#) learn from grassroots practitioners and how is that knowledge then reinjected into research and policy work?

Ian Thomas (13:04)

So just to give one example. About two years ago, we created a cultural heritage protection peer learning network, which operated across 13 countries across the Middle East and Africa, and was made up of practitioners, heritage protection practitioners who were running projects on the ground across Africa and the Middle East.

The peer learning network brought them together online over 18 months to kind of share reflections, to share key challenges and opportunities that they had identified themselves. It wasn't that the [British Council](#) had identified these issues. These were bottom-up from the projects themselves saying these are the things we want to talk about from our communities, from our projects. And we want to talk to these other countries and these other projects about this to find common solutions, common ways forward through this.

So learning and insight is a growing area. They feed into our programme design, our projects design and our funding design, and also how we share learning and insight internally across the [British Council](#), but also sharing what we know externally as well. We have an external podcast series of our own, for example, "[Our World Connected](#)", that's on our website. We publish insight and research and evaluation on our website. We're also trying to get out there to help inform through side events, through policy engagement, but also with practitioners, you know, sharing our knowledge, sharing our insight in this space. It is a growing area for us.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (14:28)

That is really great to hear that the [British Council](#) has put in place projects and it is working in peer learning networks, and creating websites and resources for people in conflict areas through cultural heritage. Lora, what does this tell you about, you know, the need and capacity to truly connect to one another?

Lora Ksieniewicz (14:47)

I mean, I think what we can see here is just how multifaceted the approach needs to be to serve those in need. All of the institutional support is so critical to being able to garner further funding and support for the projects that we're doing. And of course, when we're talking about having tools that can be beneficial multiculturally, there's going to be different challenges in different communities.

Sometimes there's a stigma against mental health or mental wellness tools. Sometimes there's an idea that it means that there's a flaw in the individual. So it's important to approach all of these with a level of sensitivity when we talk to folks that are actually going to be using these tools. For example, speaking to Nene and speaking to folks that are in impacted communities, you know, this level of really listening into how we might need to adapt and adjust our approach is so important.

It's one of the UN principles of participation and inclusion, really making sure that we're not just sort of creating a programme and handing it over, but we're really talking to those that would be using the programme and leveraging the programme. And then also having, of course, the research and the institutional support is bolstering as well. So I think even just in this conversation, we can see examples of the interconnectedness and the dependency on one another to really make lasting change and impact.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (16:14)

Yes, exactly. Exactly. That's what I was thinking. Like these three approaches, they're not isolated. They can actually strengthen each other and work together.

Now let's bring this to our listeners with a final question for this episode. What is one concrete thing you want them to know or do to support culture-based mental health work in conflict zones?

Ian Thomas (16:33)

It will be about sharing learning and insight more in this space. There is a vast amount of knowledge and insight siloed away, fragmented away, and how we can bring all that together, knit all that together, all that knowledge, insight and learning to help support practitioners in this space. So I think there's something there about bringing together the combined knowledge and insight to help inform practice but also to help inform funders and policymakers in this space. At the moment, it's quite fragmented, the evidence base and the learning.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (17:03)

Thank you, perfect. Yes, practice on the ground, definitely needed in the field. Lora?

Lora Ksieniewicz (17:08)

I think there's two things I would want folks to really appreciate and one is that every impact matters. So we think, "oh I can't make a big donation" or "I don't have a lot of time to offer". There's always a way to make an impact. And if everyone can contribute some level of effort, whether it's—sometimes it's as simple as sharing a post or amplifying a voice of someone that needs their story told. Sometimes it's taking a stand against someone saying something in public that is offensive or hate speech, right? All of these things really are so important in the world today. And as we start to want to make it more of a place that aligns values of being connected and driving forth good change.

And then the other piece that I think is really important is that sometimes wellness and the arts can be thought of as not-necessities. When we think of folks that have been in conflict, or we think of folks that have been in crisis, we think, okay, well, they need shelter and they need food. And that's often true. And yet, the UN at one point had done the big grand survey of beneficiaries of different efforts. And one of the top results that people wanted was education. And everyone was very surprised that people wanted education. But what folks that had been through a tremendous amount of conflict and trauma wanted was hope. They wanted hope for their children to live a better life than they had experienced. They wanted the knowledge that there was this future.

And so I think when we look at arts and we look at wellness and we look at these tools, like these are tools that help folks have hope, and to see that there's a future and that there is this sort of resonance still in life, even when it's been incredibly difficult. It's not an add-on to have music, to have passion, to have the ability to sort of sleep through the night, no matter what you may have experienced prior, and to give folks tools that can help them better accomplish these things. These things that I think we all recognise make life worth living, right? Showing up and hearing this beautiful piece of music, listening to Nene play the violin, for example.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (19:24)

Thank you, Lora. I totally agree that communities have started to take on culture not anymore as a supplement, but more as a primary response and a primary resource for their trauma and for what they're going through.

Nene, would you like to say something about this? What is one thing that grassroots practitioners want people to know, or like how can they support culture-based mental health?

Maw Hpray Myar (Nene) (19:47)

I want those people to know that my people can heal their mental health through the wisdom in their culture and traditions. But when others don't understand it, they may criticise and say this way doesn't work. Because of that, people can start to lose trust in their own traditions. That's why it is important to encourage art. At the very least, they really need to listen to us. So please listen to us.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (20:21)

That's a great message. Listen to the communities that are asking for help.

Thank you to Maw Hpray Myar, Ian Thomas and Lora Ksieniewicz for this essential conversation.

As we close this conversation, three insights stand out. First, none of this work happens without the kind of passion, commitment and energy that Maw brings to her communities. Staying present, listening and building trust over time, transcending personal traumas into resistance.

Second, as Ian emphasised, we must approach this work with a do-no-harm mindset, creating trauma-informed practice and safe spaces where culture becomes a resource for healing, not an imposition. And finally, Lora reminded us that the connections we're building aren't just financial, they're practical, philosophical and deeply human, recognising that we all share the struggle of living in a chaotic world and we all need these tools.

In Episode 2 we'll look forward. What's changing in this field? How do we move from individual projects to systemic change?

Thank you to our partners [culture Solutions](#) and [ASEF Culture360](#) for making this dialogue possible. The podcast is published on [culture360.asef.org](#) and [culturesolutions.eu](#) and is available on Spotify, SoundCloud and Apple Podcasts.

Please follow, like and share this episode and stay tuned for Episode 2, where we explore what the future holds for culture-based mental health work in conflict zones and Asia-Europe relations.

Thank you for listening and see you next time.