

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT - EPISODE 2

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](https://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 back! In Episode 1 we explored how culture supports mental health in crisis contexts through three different approaches.

Maw Hpray Myar or Nene's grassroots work bringing music to communities in Myanmar's conflict zones. Ian Thomas' institutional perspective from the [British Council's cultural protection programmes](https://britishcouncil.org/cultural-protection-programmes) and Lora Ksieniewicz's innovative ways to connect resources to practitioners on the ground.

Today, in Episode 2, we look forward. What's changing in this field? What's needed next? How do we move from individual projects to systemic change?

Together we'll explore the evolution of this work, the next generation of practitioners and the visions for integrating culture into humanitarian mental health responses globally.

Maw, Ian and Lora, thank you for returning to our podcast. Let's continue the conversation.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (01:41)

Maw, my first question is for you. As we talked about in our previous episode, you have made a big, profound journey from armed resistance to culture resistance and recently completed a module in mental health and wellbeing. And now you're teaching this to the next generation in Myanmar. When you teach young activists about using culture as resistance, what do you want them to understand?

Maw Hpray Myar (Nene) (02:05)

I want those young people to understand that music is not only something to enjoy but also a way to express resistance. I want them to experience it and share it with others.

For me, resistance means knowing our rights and speaking up, even when our tradition and culture are being threatened.

The military wants to narrow our minds through fear and war, to make us surrender by making us unhappy. When the military tries to break our spirit, I believe that choosing to stay joyful is also a form of resistance. Through music and tradition, I want to bring back happiness to my people and I believe my people have the ability to create that state of mind for themselves.

They just need some help as they already have good resilience in them. This is one kind of resistance I have learned in this revolution.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (03:10)

Thank you very much, Maw. This evolution from one form of resistance to another, and now you're passing this knowledge forward, is really needed and powerful. And I really like staying joyful as a form of resistance and bringing happiness to your people as your objective with your school and with your work.

Ian, I want to ask you about a shift happening in the field of culture protection itself. So culture protection in conflict zones traditionally focuses on tangible heritage, so monuments, buildings, and sites. But when it comes to mental health in conflict zones, it seems that the intangible is what matters. How is the field evolving to recognise that protecting cultural practices is essential? And are we moving toward a systemic integration of culture into humanitarian mental health responses?

Ian Thomas (04:04)

Great question. So we are seeing a growing area in the field of intangible heritage, or as UNESCO calls it, [living heritage](#). So heritage protection and institutions now recognising rituals, songs, crafts, oral histories that help communities process trauma. How cultural practices provide structure when life becomes challenging or fragile, or how shared cultural heritage activity rebuilds trust in very fractured and fragile communities due to conflict or war or other issues like climate.

How safeguarding intangible heritage provides that kind of social support, that resilience support, cohesion support for local communities and people. So you're starting to see why [UNESCO's 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) has become increasingly relevant as a crisis response, as a resilience response, as a cohesion response.

So across the sector now, you're starting to see trauma-informed documentation of intangible heritage, you're starting to see community-led safeguarding plans being put into place, integration of cultural community and cultural continuity into humanitarian protection frameworks. Heritage workers have been trained in mental health first aid principles, for example. And also you're starting to see how evaluation systems are tracking resilience and wellbeing outcomes through heritage programmes and heritage protection programmes.

So for example, we've got a [Cultural Protection Fund project in Pakistan](#), for example, that looks at craft heritage and women's economic resilience. So how it supported women in kind of a fragile context, strengthened community cohesion, supported women's agency and livelihoods, alongside preserving intangible craft knowledge and preservation. So we're seeing cultural practice itself become a coping mechanism as a source of agency, of resilience, of wellbeing, of mental health, for example.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (05:59)

Thank you very much Ian. I'm really glad to hear that we are moving towards this evolution of the field in understanding and documenting and evaluating how living heritage, as you said, can work as a coping mechanism and is embedded into the new policies and the [UNESCO convention](#).

Lora, you have worked extensively in humanitarian contexts and we see that both human-caused and natural disasters continue relentlessly. In this case we have the Myanmar case that is still happening since 2021. So when linking culture and mental health in crisis zones, how do you keep the human dimension central when the scale of needs feels so overwhelming, right?

Lora Ksieniewicz (06:45)

As I believe we talked about this a little bit in the last episode, but it can be really easy to just start to focus on the immediate and most visible needs and getting things like food and shelter delivered. The human element is in the very root word of humanitarian effort for a reason.

And when you get at the definition of what humanitarian aid is, one of the key principles is that it's not just getting folks to survive, but to be able to live with dignity, right? That's the word that we keep coming back to in the humanitarian sector is to live a life with dignity.

Of course, there's surviving the initial conflict and then there's the aftermath of having to deal with that trauma. And we know that the impact that that can have on an individual's mental health and their will to survive, their will to continue to live. It can certainly exacerbate family dynamics, can exacerbate domestic violence, it can exacerbate all of these sorts of secondary traumas that can happen after an already chaotic and traumatic event.

And so I think being able to address the needs of mental health and wellness and also be able to take that out into family dynamics and community dynamics is another aspect of survival and it may not be the sort of thing where, you know, in a refugee camp or an IDP camp that's been established for some time, if we look at some of the communities that we were in in Jordan where folks have been living in some of these camps for decades now.

The way that the wellness programmes can be implemented and run in something like that is quite different than how it needs to be done in an immediate crisis situation. But in an immediate crisis situation, even after, say, a flood or a storm or a conflict, it's when responding, not reacting, is even more critical, making sure that we're not making those hasty errors right away out of a reactionary response that can have a worse impact later on down the road. We need to be clear-eyed, clear-headed, clear-hearted. And so these tools are essential right from the beginning.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (08:59)

Yes, Lora, thank you very much. The points you touched on, on these visible needs of living with dignity and on how hard it can be to help communities that are in an active conflict zone and not after the conflict is really important. And I know you're working with Maw trying to help communities in Myanmar and we look forward to seeing the fruits, the results of these collaborations.

I would like now to push all three of you to try to envision the future together. Looking, let's say five years ahead from now, what needs to change for culture-based mental health work in conflict zones to move from the margins to the mainstream? For instance, Ian, what policy or institutional shifts are necessary?

Ian Thomas (09:47)

So the shift is to be evidence-led, evidence-informed in this space, moving from time-bound projects to kind of ecosystems of practice. So using evidence instead of having short-term projects, which are limited in time, limited in impact, limited in funding, how we can shift the policy landscape to think of ecosystems of practice, linking cultural actors, mental health actors, organisations, practitioners, and policymakers.

So you're bringing everyone together into an ecosystem that is informed by evidence, learning, and insight. So you're linking everyone together, you're breaking down silos in this space, and you're getting over these kinds of short term, limited impact interventions or projects that may be a couple of weeks or a couple of days, but you're moving into a systems approach. And within that, then you have space for learning across practitioners, policymakers, mental health sectors, you're bringing the sectors together, practitioners from mental health and the cultural sector and the heritage sector together, policymakers, and also funding as well. And also you're doing that you're putting learning at the heart of that as well.

So I think that moving away from short-term interventions to long-term, evidence-informed, learning at the heart, bringing sectors together type approach would be a game changer in this space.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (11:08)

Yes, absolutely. No short-term projects seems the right move in these situations and not having projects anymore, but having an actual system that works for the communities is what is definitely needed in the shift.

Maw, what do you think? What needs to change for grassroots practitioners? And talking from your work in Myanmar, what needs to be resourced and recognised?

Maw Hpray Myar (Nene) (11:31)

I think people need to better understand that the work we do is based on our traditions. They also need to know how we work and the results we are achieving. For that, I think it is important for us to have as many platforms and networks as possible to share our experience, challenges, and our success stories and pitfalls. I believe it is very important to listen to what we are doing and to recognise our work because our methods are based on our traditions and it can be hard for outsiders to understand. That's why people really need to listen to us carefully. When you listen, you not only understand better, but also start to see our potential and know better how to support it and what we truly need. And we need to raise our voice and make people understand better about our work.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (12:30)

Yes, we can see that learning and understanding is at the heart of culture-based mental health work. Thank you, Maw. Lora, based on your Myanmar collaboration, what infrastructure or support system would make this partnership more sustainable?

Lora Ksieniewicz (12:48)

I think leaning into what Nene was just saying, really amplifying the feedback from her community and the work that she's doing and being able to listen to their experience and the impact of the music programme and the arts programme and the wellness programme.

I think that helps alone make it more sustainable as we understand the benefits of it. I love what Ian said about creating this ecosystem as well. And I think there's a missing piece that all of these humanitarian efforts need to be incorporating these tools into their training programmes for the humanitarian aid workers as well, right? That's the sort of piece in the middle. And the more that we can recognise that those addressing trauma, those experiencing the trauma, and those trying to be benefactors to help those who have experienced the trauma, all of us are dealing with the challenges of life and living in a chaotic world. And so we all need these tools and it needs to be more of an integrated ecosystem all around. And then certainly, again, listening to those beneficiaries to understand the impact is part of what's gonna naturally make it more sustainable and rolled out at a larger scale.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (14:06)

Thank you very much, Lora, for this very insightful answer on how sustainability can be seen not only as a monetary but also as a people-to-people partnership. That is really important to point that out.

For our final question, I wanted to ask you about the next generation of practitioners, policymakers, researchers, or funders entering this field. What is something that they need to unlearn, that they need to change and they need to prioritise maybe something else when thinking about culture and wellbeing?

Lora Ksieniewicz (14:42)

I think the low hanging fruit is that we need policies that are human focused versus profit and corporate focused. And now so much of how we approach policies is not identified with this sort of human benefit. And so I think at the grassroots level, we just need more leaders who are looking at the policies that they're making and implementing and the way they're governing through the lens of humanitarian aid and humanitarian support and humanitarian principles. That's my ideal.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (15:21)

What do you think, Ian?

Ian Thomas (15:23)

I would echo some of that. I would put people-centred approaches at the heart, locally-led approaches at the heart, recognise intangible heritage as a core resilience asset for policymakers and funders, community-led decision-making as default, trauma-informed practice as a baseline skill in this space, and a real focus, we're getting to see some of this recently, wellbeing of cultural practitioners as a duty of care.

And that switch from short-term to long-term. And I think that that's one of the key mindsets that needs to happen is from short-term impact, short-term funding and a shift to that kind of systems long-term, because this does take time. And it's a slow

impact that we're after here. And it's not a quick, easy fix. So that switch to long-term ecosystem thinking.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (16:12)

How do you see this happening in Asia-European contexts, in this partnership between Asia and Europe?

Ian Thomas (16:19)

I think there is something about this cultural relations approach which speaks to this kind of partnership between Europe and Asia at the moment. That kind of long-term, co-created, mutual, trust-based approach that can work in those kinds of fragile contexts.

So it's really looking at that kind of wellbeing, that resilience, that cohesion during and post-conflict settings, for example, taking that cultural relations approach, really shifting culture and heritage up the policy agenda, that it's not an add-on, it's an essential part of that fragile context toolkit, that it can play a role within that fragile context and you can have to invest in evidence generation to back that up for policymakers as well and funders. And really look at that mental health dimension really being explicit in those kinds of peace or conflict or fragility programmes as well that it's often forgotten about.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (17:17)

Thank you very much Ian. Yes, culture and heritage should be part of the toolkit when dealing with culture-based mental health work.

What policy or institutional shifts are necessary? How can the UK and the EU in the framework of Asia-Europe relations push for a common vision of cultural relations?

Ian Thomas (17:36)

It's not a quick fix. This current UK government, for example, has been resetting its relationship with the EU and the [EU Commission](#), coming back into the [EU Horizon programme](#), into the [EU Erasmus programme](#), for example. So, there was a clear—and defence and security is one of the key things that the UK and the EU are getting closer together on, so to speak, and that fragile context work, for example.

I think the EU and the UK are mostly aligned on this. The ASEAN region, for example, is a key geographical area for the UK at the moment, like it is for the EU. So yes, there are similar priorities, similar thinking. You're seeing this also with the [EU Cultural Compass](#) as well.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (18:15)

And I have a follow up question to Lora and Ian. Based on the extremely tense and volatile situations for minorities and democratic activists in Myanmar, where is the potential for culture practitioners to raise awareness and make sure these crises don't get forgotten?

Lora Ksieniewicz (18:30)

So I think we have to look at each situation uniquely. There are often conflict zones that are in an acute crisis or an acute situation where we have to use a level of discretion and safety. So yes, we want to raise awareness. We want folks' voices to be heard. We also have to be strategic and careful and make sure that we're not exposing communities to more potential harm.

And so I think that that really does bring the onus back on folks like myself or like Ian who are not in the conflict zones directly to be able to make our voices more heard from our positions of relative safety and security.

And so it can be, it can be challenging to amplify all the voices that need it. But I do think, being able to connect these personal stories as Nene said so importantly during our conversations here that, you know, communities also want to know that they're being heard. Her community wants to know that they're being heard and that their stories are being known and that they're being advocated for.

There's a little bit of the medicine in just the connection of talking and saying "we want to help you, we want to see what we can do, we want to share your stories", right? That's not enough. We need policy to back it. We need change to back it. We need funding to support it. But that human connection is just so critical to our overall wellbeing that even just giving folks a platform and a voice to be heard and making sure that their stories are shared is a little dose of that medicine that's needed in the first place.

Ian Thomas (20:12)

I would just echo that and build on that slightly. So the [British Council](#) is 90 years old as an organisation and we've been in some countries for 90 odd years and it's been about that connection and that relationship over the long term, through a variety of different contexts, through a variety of different settings. Through that cultural relations approach you make a long term commitment to being present on the ground.

Being present, being connected through a variety of different situations, through a variety of different contexts, whether it be war, fragility, the good times as well, it is having that connection, that long-term connection that allows you then to tell those stories, to connect the local to the global.

So to have that kind of presence on the ground is incredibly important in that cultural relations approach.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (20:56)

Maw, what do you think? Do you agree? Do you have any comments on what Ian has just said? And coming back to our last question, what do you think grassroots practitioners need to unlearn and what do they need to prioritise?

Maw Hpray Myar (Nene) (21:11)

One thing I want people to understand is that we are doing this work through experiential learning on the ground. So sometimes it may not match what funders are looking for. Because of that, there are times when we don't reach the support. Sometimes we also don't know what we need to do to get that support.

I would like people to focus more on the work we are doing and the impact we are creating. To say this clearly, they need to engage more with people on the ground. And also, I think, platforms like this podcast are very helpful. They give us the chance to

share our story more clearly. I believe people can understand us better this way. I thank you for this opportunity and we also hope to receive support in the areas where we are weak and thank you.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (22:14)

Thank you very much, Maw. Thank you for your participation in this podcast. Thank you very much, Lora. Thank you, Ian. It was amazing to have you here with us today.

Lora Ksieniewicz (22:23)

Thank you for having us.

Maw Hpray Myar (Nene) (22:25)

Thank you so much.

Xhesjana Haxhiu (Jess) (22:27)

Three urgent calls to action emerged from our speakers today.

Maw's plea for us to truly listen to communities, not to speak for them, but to recognise the wisdom already present in their traditions and cultural practices.

Ian's vision for moving beyond short-term projects towards evidence-based, long-term ecosystems that connect cultural actors, mental health practitioners and policymakers, supported by institutional commitments like the [British Council's](#) enduring work and the [EU's Cultural Compass](#).

Lora's reminder that connecting people across contexts is fundamental, and that wellness and culture aren't luxuries, they're as essential as food and shelter for living with dignity.

Thank you to our partners, [culture Solutions](#) and [ASEF Culture360](#) for making this dialogue possible. This podcast is published on [culture360.asef.org](#) and [culturesolutions.eu](#) and is available on Spotify, SoundCloud and Apple Podcasts. Please follow, like and share both episodes. These conversations matter and the more people who hear them, the closer we get to the systemic change we need.

Thank you for spending time with us.