

Reflection and Reconciliation:
Exploring Identities of Afro-Colombians through Music

I. Introduction

Colombia is a country with a rich and diverse cultural heritage, plagued by over two generations of violence and armed conflict. In the last two decades, the Colombian government has sought to encourage national solidarity and community engagement by supporting cultural and artistic projects throughout the country. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has developed a program to strengthen one such project involving music schools in the Department of Chocó, an area primarily populated by Afro-Colombians, which has yet to succeed. While the IDB has considered many important cultural dynamics, we believe that there are a number of areas that should be explored in more detail before the project is implemented. Specifically, in this case study we recommend utilizing Freirian pedagogy, along with dialogic communication in the form of socially conscious hip-hop, in order to effectively engage with marginalized youth. By presenting ethnographic research and quantitative findings, we justify the inclusion of a bottom-up approach to facilitating the exploration of each student's cultural identity in a society that has been profoundly shaped by violence.

II. Background

The Department of Chocó, found on the Pacific side of Colombia, has the highest poverty rate in the country (Minority Rights Group International, 2008). It is a sparsely populated area, home to approximately 60 percent of the country's Afro-descendant

population. While its residents have historically suffered from higher infant mortality and illiteracy rates than other departments, it has maintained relative peace compared to the decades-long armed conflicts affecting the rest of the country. Since the early 1990s, however, its social problems have been compounded by a three-way struggle between the national military, guerilla factions, such as the Popular Liberation Army and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and local paramilitaries. As recently as March 2012, the Governor of Chocó, Luis Gilberto Murrillo stated that the people of his department had lost faith in the state's ability to control violence in the region (Bittner, 2012). According to Berquist, Peñaranda, and Sanchez (2001) this "multidimensional violence for the control of resources, territories, social forces, and power is additionally becoming the biggest threat to Indian and Afro-Colombian populations. In particular, it constitutes a threat to the *survival of communal identity* in departments such as Chocó" (p. 6).

III. Project Overview

Amid this social unrest, the IDB is undertaking a cultural development project to support 10 music school programs, serving 1,000 – 2,000 Afro-descendant and Indigenous youth between the ages of 8 and 18 throughout Chocó. Under the title, "Music and Life: Music Schools for At-Risk Youth," the project's long-term goals are: (1) to broaden and strengthen musical practice by providing material and instructional resources to currently-failing music schools, (2) to preserve musical diversity with an emphasis on traditional and popular music forms of the region, and (3) to provide statistically valid inferences about the effect of culture-based programming on social outcomes for youth in poor and violence-prone regions.

a. Project Components

The main components of this development project involve three activities. The first activity is music instruction and involves the contracting of 20 music instructors and 10 administrative coordinators/instructors. The second activity involves production and enterprise development. As the first two long-term goals of the project involve the preserving and strengthening of musical traditions, this activity entails the production of goods and services associated with the music schools that can be used to generate revenue to ensure sustainable programming. This includes financing the creation of recordings, as well as advertisements for school services, such as appearances at local festivals and cultural events. Finally, the third activity involves life skills training. As this area is the focal point of our case study we will look at it in more detail.

According to the IDB's Plan of Operations for this project, life skills training involves the contracting of four social workers to work within the Chocó region to provide life skills lessons to students at least once per week. As stated in the Terms of Reference for the contracted social worker, they will be tasked with creating a relevant life-skills curriculum that will "address issues pertinent to students attending the school," which may include violence prevention, anger management, reproductive and sexual health, gender equity, and citizenship ("Plan of Operations", Annex IV, p. 17). In addition, the social workers are expected to facilitate monthly meetings for parents and community involving leadership and advocacy training, presentations on the state of the school, and an update on upcoming life skills courses for students.

b. Cultural Considerations

Judging overall, the designers have done much to ensure that the project addresses cultural issues of the region. The project is part of the National Plan for Living Music (PNMC), the Ministry of Culture's initiative to support Colombia's traditional music, which has promoted the creation of over 700 music schools. The PMNC programs have been received very positively, with parents and families greatly supporting their children's learning process, as well as the generation of information networks that benefit institutions and individuals linked to the program (Bamford, 2006). While these generalities show progress, a study found that in 156 of the traditional music schools of the PNMC, only 6 percent of the teachers and only 27 percent of the students were women ("Perspectiva de Género", 2009). In considering the issue of gender inequity, the IDB project aims to hire at least 50 percent women for traditional music instructors. An effort will also be made to contract a significant proportion of instructors who are over the age of 50 and under 25 years of age, in the hope of impacting the demographic profile of traditional music practitioners.

Furthermore, all teachers and students who enter the program will be required to sign a written code of conduct as a condition of the maintenance of contract or place in the music school. The code of conduct will address issues of safety, equality, and respect, and any egregious violations may result in the termination of contracts or participation at the school. In addition, training involving measures on the definition, prevention, reporting and prosecution of gender-based violence will be mandatory during the program's orientation session.

As the plan of operations details, the project's design addresses many of the factors that have prevented the growth of the PNMC music schools in the 10

municipalities in Chocó, and therefore, “neither the Executing Agency nor the Project team foresee any risk of failure” (“Plan of Operations”, p. 12). However, the authors concede that the main challenge for their project will be the problem of endemic violence, which has kept the PNMC schools in the region from succeeding in the past. To this they offer the following: “For this reason, the project has invested resources in the provision of classes in life skills to complement the music instruction provided through the PNMC to aid in ameliorating some violent behaviors and thus allow the music schools to thrive” (“Plan of Operations”, p. 12). While the addition of a life skills program is an important first step in ensuring personal growth and high success rates among students, the importance of what will be taught and, perhaps more importantly, *how* it will be taught must be considered with a deep understanding of the complexity of youth and cultural identities within the region. Apart from the requirement of the life skills curriculum being based on accredited life skills curricula, no specifics are included in the project’s details. Therefore, we have conceptualized a series of considerations and possible forms of implementation that should be taken into account as the project progresses.

IV. Project Enhancement Proposal

a. Justification

The power to inspire and engage an individual through art and music is universally known. However, music education will not be enough. When the situation is as dire as it is in Chocó and violence in Colombia has been a way of life for over a generation, sensitivity to the physical and psychological states of these students is imperative. A process of humanization and consciousness-raising should be created for

the youth of Chocó. Whether this is properly carried out depends on the environment that is created within and around the music schools. In order to do this, the adults involved with the school must understand a number of wide-ranging causes and effects that lead to these young men and women being considered “at-risk youth” while employing cultural narratives as tools for student engagement.

b. Understanding Youth and Violence

Riaño-Alcalá (2006) offers a number of insights on youth and violence through her ethnographic research in the city of Medellín, approximately 100 km from the department of Chocó. She explores the cultural dynamics of violence by observing how youth actualize memories in daily life, what she refers to as “an anthropology of remembering and forgetting” (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006, p. 7). To understand the youth of Colombia today, we must understand the nature of the oppressive violence Colombia has endured:

...the constant state of war in the life of the country has shaped a type of ‘still history’ and a generalized popular perception of a society in a ‘perpetual present,’ where little to nothing changes. The 1950s war of la Violencia humiliated the poor classes as they ‘were swept up in a war, which belonged not to them, but to the political class’ and then stigmatized them for being responsible for the barbarity of the conflict (Pécaut, 2001). In particular when negotiations between the two embattled parties created the National Front, these pains, losses and humiliations were covered over by the veil of oblivion and a call for national reconciliation. For the majority of people in the poor sectors who had been the victims, had lost their land and been forcibly displaced, this imposed forgetting weighed profoundly upon them (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006, p. 10).

To make matters worse, these social wounds were reopened in the mid 1980s when the armed conflict became amplified. The result is a discontinuity between the past, present, and future of Colombian youth, characterized by a profound shift in the ways of thinking and living within time, as well as the ways in which identities are constructed. These changes were characterized

by a lack of fear of dying young, a number of rituals such as dancing and taking part in festivities with corpses of the dead, as well as in youth attitudes focused solely on the present with no meaning given to the past or future (Amaya, 2004; Riaño-Alcalá, 2006).

Riaño-Alcalá (2006) argues that it is precisely this lack of connection with temporal reality that prevents Colombian youth from moving beyond their dire circumstances. What is needed is a process of collective mourning that recognizes the occurrence of profound trauma and offers a path toward reconciliation. As she puts it:

If practices of memory establish links of continuity with the past and provide some instances for mourning, then the excessive violence that repeats itself through time and space hinders the possibilities for collectively coming to terms with loss. It is precisely this type of collective mourning that is needed when human suffering has its origins in large-scale violence and the coercive exercise of political and economic power. When societies go through prolonged periods of violent conflict that wash away the issues and take-for-granted texture of everyday life, collective anxieties remain as an emotional sediment that might turn into hate and vengeful actions and reaffirm the ideologies that sustain these behaviors (p. 165).

Without a process of remembering and lamenting, Colombia's youth will remain stuck in a cycle of violence that has led them into a self-destructive form of social participation. For instance, among such endemic violence, many marginalized Colombian youth have learned to use violence to take part in their communities. According to Gutierrez (1998), the territorial practices of armed groups such as the militias and gangs demonstrate a subversive manner of exercising civic function, a way to become a visible communicative part of society (as quoted in Riaño-Alcalá, 2006). Seen in this way, "the reasons that trigger the fighting become secondary to the very *performance* of violence as a means of communication with a society that otherwise ignores or excludes poor youth. The images of youth as perpetrators of violence are what, ironically, created their visibility, social recognition, and the possibility of negotiating, through pacts of non-

aggression or spectacular media representations, a *form of participation in society*” (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006, p. 160).

According to Moser and McIlwain (2000), a desire for participation and inclusion is a common theme among Colombian youth. They used a participatory study to explore violence and social dynamics in nine predominantly low-income settlements or communities located in seven cities and towns that are broadly representative of Colombia’s urban areas. Based on their research, they offer a number of findings relevant to our case study.

Young people, particularly men, felt excluded from organizations within their communities and from the communities themselves. One of the major causes of this exclusion among young people was intergenerational conflict, where channels of communication between parents and their children were broken, often as a result of intrafamily violence. This schism, the researchers found, was further exacerbated by the older generation blaming young people for society’s ills.

In one example, the researchers encountered two young men from Amancer, Bucaramanga, who, feeling excluded in a similar fashion, outlined actions that could be taken to include young people in the community. This included the sentiment that if “affection and respect toward young people were established, there would be more sharing, and community programs would be more efficient. As it stood, they did not participate in any community activities because of the conflict between young people and the rest of the population” (Moser & McIlwain, 2000, p. 97).

A particularly relevant example involved a group of male rock or punk musicians who adopted an ideology of anarchic communism and were “acutely aware of their

exclusion” (Moser & McIlwain, 2000, p. 95). Being labeled as drug addicts and Satanists, the young men gained a sense of empowerment through their music, embracing their exclusion, and what they saw as the intolerance of the community, as a coping strategy.

Having an understanding of how decades of violence have impacted the lives and minds of Colombian youth allows the IDB project to be approached with an increased level of cultural sensitivity. With this information we can develop specific recommendations for the implementation of the project.

c. Developing Pedagogy

The music schools have a unique opportunity to engage with the youth of Chocó and transform their lives. However, the role of the music instructors, administrators, and social workers must go beyond a traditional form of education. Freire (1970) critiques this as follows: “the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally *narrative* character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified” (p. 70). He refers to this as the “banking” concept of education, in which, similar to the Cartesian view of learning, knowledge is something bestowed upon the student by the teacher (Freire, 1970; Brown & Adler, 2008). According to Freire (1970), this method of pedagogy is set up to serve the interests of the oppressors, to minimize students’ creativity, autonomy, and sense of humanity.

In contrast to this is what Freire refers to as “problem-posing education” based in “acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” (p. 79). This form of education is a process of collaboration between the teacher and the student with the ultimate goal of co-

investigating the world through a critical lens. It is a process of humanization and consciousness-raising.

For the music school students in Chocó to feel a sense of empowerment, they must understand for themselves that their culture is not static. They must experience the reality of oppression, “not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire, 1970, p. 49). This idea of a “closed world” perfectly illustrates Riaño-Alcalá (2000) description of an existence within an “eternal present” and how youth involved in armed conflict frequently could not remember why they had begun fighting in the first place (p. 7).

Expanding one’s perception beyond that of a static reality is the beginning of Freire’s process of *conscientização*, which Singh (2008) describes as, “the process of understanding what this life situation means and the process of transforming it” (p. 708). The process develops further with the combination of reflection and action, what Freire refers to as “praxis.” This is based on an understanding that human beings learn through dialectical reasoning and, through examining multiple perspectives and problem solving dialogues, can “form the basis of identity and self-realization” (Singh, 2008, p. 706). Freire, in other words, sees dialogue as an act of creation, whereby naming the world in which a group of individuals live in, they transform it.

In order to engage and educate their music school students, the adults involved must include them in a collaborative, deliberative process. This can be accomplished through an exploration of socially conscious music, linking self-expression to the importance of recognition and reconciliation.

d. Utilizing Dialogic Communication

Dialogues and dialectical reasoning may be manifested in numerous forms of self-expression. For instance, Singh (2008) uses a Freirian lens to argue that post-colonial narratives in the form of art, literature, and film appear time and time again in an effort to problematize themes of identity to encourage audiences to engage in conversation (p. 712-713). As such, Freire's pedagogy arises in everything from South African liberation songs, to the reggae of the Caribbean, to transcultural *telenovelas* (Singh, 2008, p. 712-715). These cultural artifacts have the ability to facilitate consciousness-raising and increase the capacity for developing solutions by allowing individuals to perceive their lives within the broader context of society (Singh, 2007, p. 69-70).

A music school is the perfect context for utilizing post-colonial narratives for dialogic communication. Likewise, the use of music and dance by Afro-Colombians for the purposes of self-expression, communication, and testimony is deeply ingrained in the culture and can be traced back to its African roots. These art forms have been historically used as a way of "managing and even overcoming the suffering and violence associated with slavery, oppression and racial discrimination" (Dennis, 2006, p. 20-22). Among the "multidimensional violence" that threatens "the survival of communal identity" that Berquist, Peñaranda and Sanchez (2001) describe, the music school has the opportunity to strengthen connections between marginalized youth and their culture, as well as its complex history.

e. Combining Art with Life

The use of hip-hop in North American classrooms has been shown to be an excellent method for engaging marginalized youth, fostering literacy and curiosity, and

challenging students to think critically (Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Morrell, 2002; Ibrahim, 2012). In a similar manner, the social workers and teachers of the Chocó music schools can use Afro-Colombian rap as a way of starting discussions, speaking the “language” of these Afro-Colombian youth. Dennis (2006) offers numerous examples of young Afro-Colombian rappers addressing the conflicts and contradictions of their minority cultural identity. Heavily influenced by American rappers of the ‘80s and early ‘90s, these artists refer to themselves as *poetas callejeros* (street poets) and their performances as “*hip-hop social*” (social hip-hop) (Dennis, 2006, p. 137). Through storytelling and lyrical descriptions, artists such as *Ghettos Clan*, *Choc Quib Town*, *Asilo 38*, and *Flaco Flow y Melalina* deal with issues of sexual violence, ethnic cleansing, guerilla warfare, globalization, and general issues of poverty, among others (see Dennis, 2006 for specific examples). From a Freirian standpoint, these songs may function as a “coded” situation, where the individual takes part in the “decoding” of the music’s content, moving from the “representation to the very concrete situation in which and with which she finds herself” (Freire, 1970, p. 105). In other words, the youth listening to the song may find herself identifying with the characters or situations being posed. Instead of the teacher explaining a life issue and trying to force a contrived conversation, the music itself can offer a more accessible entrance into a difficult topic.

A possible life skills lesson could involve, for instance, “La Jungla” by *Flaco Flow y Melalina*, where the rappers describe Colombia as a war zone and reprimand the leaders of each faction for letting down their people — they proclaim that it is always the common people that kill or are killed (Dennis, 2006, p.148-149). This could open up a discussion about how violence affects the students’ lives and offer a point of navigation

to such issues as violence prevention, anger management, and citizenship as the music school project aims to address. Using musical narratives in this way can engender relevancy and authenticity in the classroom, allowing for student self-expression, while giving the adults of the school a deeper understanding into the lives of their students. In addition, Moser and McIlwain (2000) found that the most popular community solution for promoting the inclusion of youth (24 percent of all solutions cited) was to “offer workshops and talk to young people” (p.111). These methods of dialogic communication could also assist the music schools in building trust with the community.

Furthermore, the conscious act of acknowledging and exploring issues of trauma, and connecting them to a culture’s history and future trajectory, can more firmly place an individual within a context of hope. As Riaño-Alcalá (2006) argues, the significance and potential of recognition and remembrance for groups and individuals affected by violent and traumatic experiences has its significance in the “capacity of memory to bridge the past, present and future; to foster associations between a past of pains, sorrows, revenge, violence and a future of rebuilding, remembering and active reconstruction...The absence of expressive channels for mourning constitutes a significant obstacle for establishing enduring connections between this sense of place and a peaceful resolution of the conflicts” (p. 165). As we have described, the youth of Colombia are stuck in an “eternal-present,” trapped in a feeling of exclusion and the absence of an imagined future. Riaño-Alcalá’s “capacity of memory” resonates deeply with Appadurai’s (2004) notion of the “capacity to aspire,” which “provides an ethical horizon within which more concrete capabilities can be given meaning, substance, and sustainability” (p. 82). By identifying

their social constraints and the past situations that have limited them, the youth may in turn connect with goals and aspirations that had been buried deep within them.

f. Limitations

While the above considerations and additions to the IBD's music school project can offer a number of enhancements to its key components, there are a few unaddressed issues that should be taken into account. For one, this case study has focused on issues surrounding the Afro-Colombian population in Chocó. While Afro-Colombians make up the largest cultural group in the department, about half of the Embera indigenous group (approximately 35,000) resides there as well (Minority Rights Group, 2008b). The United Nation's High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) list the Embera peoples as in danger of extinction, due to murder, threats of violence, and forced displacement, and stated a growing concern for young indigenous Colombians being recruited by illegal armed groups ("Colombia's indigenous people," 2010). As part of the IBD's music school project involves engaging indigenous youth in Chocó, their cultural needs must be assessed as well. We believe, however, that the methodology of engaging youth with relevant cultural narratives will be equally effective with marginalized groups beyond Afro-Colombians. It will be the responsibility of the music school instructors and social workers to seek out useful tools for dialogic communication that are relevant for all appropriate demographics.

Another important consideration is whether the older generations will be open to the use of provocative forms of self-expression such as *hip-hop social*. Some members of the community will most likely express skepticism in regards to the art form as a teaching

tool. We encourage the instructors and administrators to offer examples of the lessons plans and demonstrate how the music will be used to generate substantive discussion.

Finally, a broader limitation to the project is the fact that, in a war-like environment, there may be urgent issues that need to be dealt with before any productive learning can take place. Considerations regarding security within and around the school should be taken into account, and the IBD practitioners and music school administrators should work with other organizations and the community at large to develop resources and services that will help ensure the safety and productivity of the students.

V. Conclusion

In an environment of on-going conflict and social upheaval, the mission and practices of the Chocó music schools should employ Freirian pedagogy as a radical process of consciousness-raising and empowerment. This can be accomplished through the use of dialogic communication involving post-colonial narratives. Afro-Colombian youth have a rich heritage of storytelling and self-expression that can be tapped into to make the life skills lessons in each music school more authentic and engaging. One area to explore is the use of socially conscious hip-hop as a tool for generating discussions and accessing and exploring cultural identities. Already found to be productive in fostering critical thinking in other African Diaspora, rap songs (in this case written by Afro-Colombian artists) offer a powerful context for both the students and adults to more deeply explore and understand the socially turbulent world in which they must navigate.

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