



Peace Building Through Creative Arts in Cyprus

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INTRODUCTION

“ARTISTIC AND CREATIVE PRACTICES deconstruct and re-construct our understandings on social and cultural topics and bring to the fore new forms of cultural awareness and appreciation of different cultures and different ways of seeing the world.” —Nihal Sognaci

Known as the “last divided city in Europe,” Cyprus’ capital city, Nicosia, represents a country divided both physically and ethnically by what is referred to as the Cyprus problem. The Cyprus Problem signifies the tension created from the 1972 Turkish invasion, and subsequent occupation of the northern third of the island by Turkey, which led to the current physical, cultural, and political divide of the country. Mary Olin in her article “Through the Eyes of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots: The Perception of Cyprus” calls its political climate today a “negative peace,” with no current war but great tension between the two sides (Olin 1). Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, and the United Nations all actively seek a solution, whether through reunification or two separate states (2). Olin goes on to assess the current situation in Cyprus by defining what a “divided society” looks like and what problems can arise:

Divided societies are groups of people who live next to each other, but have barriers dividing them. Those barriers can be religious, physical, cultural, or emotional. In the case of Cyprus, it has been all of the above. This multi-layered division creates a situation ripe for the propaganda to take hold and feed the people with non-truths. (5)

Moreover, a “tangible” sign of division between the two sides is the UN green line, or symbolic buffer zone (Pellapaisiotis 136). The opening of the buffer zone, as a more neutral location between the two sides, acts as a “catalyst” or bridge necessary to move the peace talks further (Olin 2). The buffer zone has been a compelling landscape for artists on both sides of the border and has hosted multiple exhibitions. Hence, I believe the creative arts peacebuilding has the power to bring unity that could lead to solving the troubling Cyprus

problem. Artists’ work within a “real political space” allows them to produce “socially and politically relevant” work (Pellapaisiotis 138). Moreover, artists are now able to express their cultural identity through the creative arts, which enables both sides to value each other’s culture, ultimately leading to mutual understanding and peace. This is crucial, as, unfortunately, neither the Turkish nor Greek side have respected cultural landmarks and monuments. In the northern occupied territory, “many Greek Orthodox church windows have been smashed” and “wall paintings in the Limnia and Engomi village churches have been disfigured” while in the southern, predominantly Greek, Republic of Cyprus “the main mosque has been entirely erased and the Turkish Cypriot graves have been damaged” (Bouchier 37). Thus, this disturbing destruction of cultural heritage and identity amid animosity ensures a difficult and painful road to peace for both sides.

Yet, as Clark points out in her article “The Creative Path to Peace: An Exploration of Creative Arts-based Peacebuilding Projects,” creative arts as a means of peacebuilding has shown that appreciating different cultures is crucial, as culture “frames our very thinking” (28). Thus, both sides must recognize their own cultural biases by striving to value and acknowledge the other’s cultural “characteristics” (29). Furthermore, creativity is “inherent in every culture” as creative arts, and artistic expressions, have developed to offer an “outlet for thoughts, feelings, traditions or beliefs” (29), thus, making it an excellent opportunity to build peace.

Furthermore, the creative arts possess the ability to raise awareness, express the inward significance of the Cyprus problem in a way that promotes peace as well as open dialogue between the two sides. Also, it can be utilized to counter “propaganda,” as well as the “us” versus “them” mentality (Olin 5), which can dehumanize the other side and in turn sabotage arts-based peacebuilding efforts. Therefore, the Cyprus problem has the potential to be solved through arts-based peacebuilding.

CREATIVE ARTS CAN RAISE CULTURAL AWARENESS AND APPRECIATION

How can the creative arts raise cultural awareness as a first step in the peacebuilding process? In the article “Strategic arts-based peacebuilding,” Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch underline the fact that “raising awareness” of conflicts needs to take place in order to get different parties to negotiate (220). Therefore, they argue that by “nonviolent action” peacebuilders can “raise public awareness and sympathy” as well as convincing or compelling others to “accept the needs or desires” of the other side (222). Artists have the unique ability to spotlight the intensity of current conflicts through the creative arts, which includes, but is not limited to, mediums such as: the theatre, spoken word, hip-hop, documentary film-making, public murals, and installation art (221). One excellent example occurred in Mexico where public murals done by artists such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco raised public awareness of the problems concerning social injustice by contesting the economic situation in Mexico that benefited the elite (222). Thus, the public murals were powerful as they acted “as a mirror to society” portraying a “symbolic portrait of oppression and conflict” mainly between different areas of society, as well as illustrating an “idealistic vision of the future” (222). Therefore, by bringing to light these pressing problems in society, one can help opposing sides to empathize and understand the conflict further, paving the path to reconciliation and peace by providing a hopeful ideal for the future.

In Cyprus, this approach of first raising cultural awareness would be very beneficial for both sides as there are common cultural, religious, and ideological differences between both the north and the south. Olin reminds us that many Cypriots from both sides grew up “knowing that the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots are not like each other at all” due to what “parents and grandparents had told them” (Olin 28). Instead of reminding Cypriots of the cultural differences that they are so well aware of, the creative arts have the power to raise awareness of the two culture’s similarities.

THE CREATIVE ARTS CAN REBUILD CONNECTIONS

One important aspect of the creative arts in peacebuilding is the fact that it can “rebuild connections with others” as well as open dialogue between opposing sides (Clark 38). Communities divided by war, and conflict dangerously “begin to dehumanize” the opposing side to make them appear more unworthy, and less connected (39). Thus, in

order to move forward with peacebuilding, the creative arts assist in “rekindling human bonds” and help the different sides humanize one another (40).

In Cyprus, Olin similarly argues that one of the main dividing factors between the two different cultures stems from Turkish and Greek Cypriot nationalism (17). Nationalism gathers people together who “see themselves as being the same” objectively and culturally, and it “encourages the dehumanization of people who are not like them” (17). It justifies horrible actions taken against the other side as “being for the good of the people and the nation” (18). This includes both sides’ actions against one another in 1972. Ironically, she notes that from an outsider’s perspective, Turkish and Greek Cypriots appear extremely alike, aside from their respective religious differences. (18). The majority of their foods are “the same or similar”; they look similar physically; their “sense family and community” are the same; in a cultural sense, the list continues (18-19).

Moreover, my interview with Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud, the executive director for the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace progress, reveals how the creative arts promoted peacebuilding through a photography exhibition. This exhibition was sponsored by the Swedish Embassy and hosted in the United Nations buffer zone. They invited Cypriots from both communities together, as well as internationals, to discuss the exhibition as a means of building trust and reconciliation between the two communities. She noted that the exhibition on fatherhood was a “bridge-builder” for this “gap” between the two cultures, as they focused on their similarities as parents. As Olin noted, the “gap” between the Turkish and the Greek Cypriots stems from their nationalistic perspectives (17). At the exhibition, Nikos Christodoulides, Foreign Minister for Cyprus, gave a speech showing a private side of himself. According to Mrs. Weiderud, Turkish, and Greek Cypriots saw a “personal,” more real side to this politician, as he talked about being a father of three daughters. She believes that if it was not for the photography he would have not “communicated so freely” about his personal life, as the creative arts “enables communication.” Through this humanizing experience, the two communities were brought further together despite the exhibition not “aim[ing] to discuss the Cyprus problem” (Weiderud). Additionally, Mrs. Weiderud notes that, like it or not, Cypriots at some stage in a conversation will discuss the Cyprus Problem, a continual thought on their minds. She went on to add that peacebuilding increased as several participants brought their spouses and children to the exhibition, and many diverse cultural families

were brought together. After people from both sides got to know one another and saw their similarities as human beings, it was “easier to hear the pain of the other” and to “empathize” concerning the Cyprus problem (Weiderud). She and the Swedish ambassador at the time declared it was “extremely successful” for bringing the communities together and building peace.

ARTS BASED PEACEBUILDING CAN HEAL AND BRING ABOUT CHANGE

The creative arts can not only raise appreciation for different cultures and cultivate relationships, but it can also be an “agent for change” concerning peacebuilding as it has the power to “mobilize, to rouse, to animate, to communicate broadly, to persuade, and to energize” (Clark 36). Clark argues that it has the power to bring about a change in peacebuilding circumstances where even other “methods have been unsuccessful” (38). For example, in the border disputes between Burkina Faso and Mali in the 1980s, international intervention failed numerous times to end the killing and conflict. Nonetheless, when the presidents of the conflicting countries were invited to a “peace summit” that involved “poetry, song, and dance” specifically aimed to encourage peacebuilding, the two men “shed tears, embraced, and made an oath to end the war” (38). This illustrates the significant value of arts-based peacebuilding further.

Moreover, the Home for Cooperation in Cyprus, located in the buffer zone, aims to act as a “bridge-builder” as it encourages people from both sides to “cooperate beyond constraints and diving lines” (Home for Cooperation). I asked them how the creative arts have raised cultural awareness in Cyprus, and how effective it has been in bringing about change. Nihal Soganci, on behalf of the Home for Cooperation peacebuilding team, explained that the Home for Cooperation has developed an annual Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival to provide a platform to “question sensitive topics” while enabling both sides to “engage with one another regardless of the dominant historical narratives, ideologies or identities.” For Buffer Fringe 2020, the conceptual theme of “displacement” hits home hard “on an island and in a century where the mourning of displacement can be traced across generations,” as the war caused many to lose their homes (Sognaci). According to her assessment, the “healing power” of the creative arts “opens new grounds to understand the role of memory . . . and nostalgia in peace-building.” More significantly, the Sognaci underlined that the performing arts festival proves to be the “best tool to trigger

discussions about personal or collectivistic traumas” that Cypriots have undergone in the past, as well as promoting “understanding, respect and . . . trust.”

PROBLEMS WITH ARTS BASED PEACEBUILDING
However, some have challenged this approach to peacebuilding through the creative arts, as while it can be utilized for healing, it can and often has been used “to support and promote violence and hate” (Clark 53). Thus, when art becomes more politicized, challenges arise for artists to “navigate the expectations of funders and bureaucrats who may have unrealistic expectations and hidden agendas” (55). Furthermore, Clark acknowledges that “malevolent creativity” can greatly undermine arts-based peacebuilding. She uses the example of how violent regimes and dictators specifically utilized the arts as a major part of their “propaganda machines” to “proselytize for evil” (53).

During my interview with Mrs. Weiderud, I asked how the creative arts may counter peacebuilding in Cyprus, to which she provided a recent example. President Erdoğan of Turkey recently visited the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and had a picnic on one of the coastal towns located in the buffer zone, off-limits for Cypriots of both sides (Weiderud). To make matters worse, airplanes in the sky made a contrail in the shape of a crescent moon and a star—the symbol of Islam and the Turkish flag. Mrs. Weiderud pointed out how this undermined peacebuilding as it was an “extremely painful reminder for the Southern Greek Cypriots” while “extremely proud for the Turkish Cypriots.” This again links back to the ugly reality of nationalism found on both sides (Olin 17). A “lack of empathy and compassion” using “symbols,” a form of visual art, can be very powerful and dangerous for dividing both sides further (Weiderud).

HOW THE CREATIVE ARTS HAVE BEEN USED TO COUNTER HATRED IN CYPRUS
While there are dangers to arts-based peacebuilding, the only way to counter the negative is through the unique way it can rebuild relationships, raise cultural awareness, and bring about change. Cyprus desperately needs arts-based peacebuilding to neutralize this negative tension between the north and south.

This leaves us with these questions: how have the creative arts impacted discussions for peacebuilding and reunification and what future role it can play in this area? Soganci used the example of the Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival to answer these questions, claiming it holds

a “performative form of power” that brings awareness to the “critical lens that has arisen in the community that questions the normalized quotidian reality,” thus, creating a “contrapuntal crack.” Through this crack, it will be possible to “imagine alternatives to the dominant discourses that physically and mentally divide the Island” (Sognaci). Hence, this creative festival aims to rouse Cypriots from both sides to question their division as an island and to come up with a solution to benefit both sides (Sognaci). She points out that by using “bi-communal collaborations” as a vessel, many artists from the North, South, and internationally find an “opportunity to come together, to produce together and hence be able to imagine a common future together.”

CONCLUSION

Through the creative arts, more progress can be made in solving the infamous Cyprus problem that haunts the island. The successful, creative work of the Home for Cooperation and the Swedish Embassy serves as a model for peacebuilding efforts on both sides of the island, and as proof that arts-based peacebuilding effectively applies to the situation in Cyprus. To see more progress made towards resolving the Cyprus problem, awareness must be raised about the similarities of the two cultures via the creative arts for mutual cultural appreciation. The toxic nationalism of the Turks and Greeks must be extinguished, and both sides must begin to identify as simply Cypriots (Olin 19). Arts-based peacebuilding can heal Cyprus of its

horrific history of violence, hate, and division leading to unity and harmony between both cultures.

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