



Schooling and Students' Linguistic and Cultural Identity in Baltistan: Silencing the Local Music

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of the schooling process in shaping the linguistic and cultural identity of secondary school students in Baltistan, a region in Northern Pakistan known for its unique culture and the Sino-Tibetan language 'Balti'. Specifically, the study examines the impact of excluding local music from school activities on students' linguistic and cultural identity. Previous literature highlights the significant value of local music in Baltistan, which serves as an integral part of cultural life, rituals, and ceremonies, contributing to a strong sense of identity among students. However, over time, music has been discouraged for various reasons. Surprisingly, the data reveals that neither private nor public schools offer music lessons, reflecting a growing conservative attitude towards music and its negative implications for students' linguistic and cultural affiliation. Consequently, students are alienated and distanced from their local musical traditions, which poses policy challenges in fostering an inclusive learning environment that supports the positive development of linguistic and cultural identity.

Keywords: linguistic, music, identity, schooling, Baltistan, school, processes, culture

1. Introduction

The first couplet of the famous Masnavi of Jaladuddin Rumi starts with the verse:

Hearken to the reed-flute, how it complains,
Lamenting its banishment from its home.

With the story of flute Rumi (nd) starts building his mystical thoughts.

Music is often described as the universal language, capable of evoking emotions, expressing joy and sorrow, and conveying spiritual messages. It serves as a powerful medium for cultural expression, reflecting the aesthetic preferences, maturity, and deep-rooted aspects of a society. Music fosters a profound connection and sense of belonging to one's culture. It is not only limited to human beings but also has the ability to captivate animals. The essence of music can be found in the melodic songs of birds, the gentle sounds of a flowing spring, and the rhythmic cascades of waterfalls. Any harmonious movement of objects possesses an inherent musical quality.

This paper is a segment of my doctoral research on the development of cultural identity among secondary students in Baltistan. The study focuses on four significant aspects that shape and signify cultural identity: language, music, religion, and school ceremonies. In this particular segment, the attention is devoted to the exploration of music and its role in cultural identity formation.

The objectives of this part of the study were to:

- Explore the cultural practices, forms and manifestations of 'music' in the schools' processes,
- Explore the perceptions and preferences of teachers and students about 'music' as essential aspect and identifier of cultural identity.

1.1 The Cultural Background and Music

Scholars concur that "cultural identity" is a socially constructed concept that encompasses various aspects of personal, ethnic, social, and national identities. Templeman (1999) posits that "cultural identity" emerges through ongoing processes of social construction, and the delineation of cultural identity inevitably involves acts of inclusion and exclusion (p. 17). This struggle of inclusion and exclusion is evident in educational settings, where local voices are systematically silenced through subtle methods employed by site-based management. Music, being a significant identifier of cultural identity, serves as a powerful medium that connects individuals to their culture.

The primary focus of this paper is to examine music as a creator and indicator of "cultural identity" within the context of public schooling with a centralized national curriculum and education policy in Baltistan. Geographically situated in a strategically important region of Pakistan, bordering China and India, Baltistan is part of the politically contested area known as Gilgit-Baltistan. It holds a rich historical and religious heritage, encompassing traditions and cultures such as *Somalek*, *Kesarism*, *Bonism*, and *Buddhism* (Lobsang, 1997). Often



referred to as "Little Tibet," Baltistan shares its cultural lineage with the larger regions of Tibet and Ladakh, albeit now geographically isolated from its neighboring parts in India and China due to political boundaries.

In the history of Baltistan, music played a vital role in major social events, particularly during ceremonies like marriages, seasonal celebrations such as *losar*, *mephang*, *strobla*, *brasmus*, and *jikhmos*, as well as entertainment and sporting events like *hltanmo* and *polo*. It is said that during polo matches, there were over 50 *kar's* (musical notes or ragas) used to communicate running commentaries to distant listeners, enabling them to understand the progress of the match through music. In the past, elder individuals would send song titles and music as gifts or tokens of remembrance to friends. These titles contained hidden meanings, and if the recipient couldn't decipher them, they would seek guidance from an elder in the village, who would explain the context and interpret the theme accordingly. Both the general public and the royal family possessed a high level of musical talent and appreciation.

With the introduction of Islam by Sufi saints, local music in Baltistan became enriched and infused with mystic spirituality. Various types of Balti music, known by Persian names such as *ziker*, *yagah*, *dogah*, and *segah*, are evidence of this integration. One of my research participants from PSB(Isl) also mentioned these forms of religious music. While Islam discourages and prohibits cultural manifestations that exploit sexual emotions, including music and dance, the phenomenon of music itself is not prohibited, especially within the context of Sufi traditions. Practices such as *sama*, *qawali*, and *ziker* of the whirling dervish are renowned not only as cultural expressions but also as spiritual practices.

In Balti culture, local music with its pure aesthetics and romantic dimensions has been an integral part of various forms of poetry (*khulu*), festivities, sports activities, religious rituals, and other cultural expressions. It is important to note that dancing music differs from listening music. *Hrtse-kar* represents typical dancing music without verbal songs, and there are 19 different types of such music, each corresponding to specific dances performed on various occasions and for different purposes (Hasrat, 2007; Nazeer, 1998; Hussainabadi, 1984).

The people of Baltistan had a strong musical talent and appreciation. In the past, elder individuals would exchange song titles and music as gifts. However, in recent times, due to the influence of fanatic religious tendencies over the past century, particularly in the last few decades, the positive perception of music in the cultural life of Baltistan has been severely damaged to the point where the very word "music" itself has become associated with suspicion.

1.2 Schooling and Identity Formation

Schooling, as a structured educational system with defined curriculum and processes, plays a significant role in shaping and molding the identities of learners. It has been recognized that schooling and curriculum are employed as tools to govern societal patterns and shape individuals' mentalities through a process of "domestication" (Freire, 1985; Apple, 1996; Popkewitz, 1997).

In the context of the Pakistani national curriculum, music is largely absent. There is no explicit mention or discussion of music within the curriculum. However, in practice, the hidden curriculum determines "what knowledge is of worth" or what is considered "official knowledge." When something is silenced in the curriculum, it implies that it is not meant to be discussed, learned, or valued. This silence also indicates an intention to hide certain aspects from students, particularly when those aspects are not publicly appreciated. This study aims to explore examples of this hidden curriculum and how school practices regarding music reflect this phenomenon. Numerous empirical studies (such as Bangsbo, 2008; Matthews & Jenkins, 1999; Foster, 1999; Tse, 2007; Zhu, 2007) have presented cases that demonstrate how schools can be used as coercive instruments to mold or suppress local, indigenous, or minority ethnic cultural identities.

3. Mode of Inquiry

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic critical approach to examine the cultural dynamics within two high schools in a semi-urban environment in Baltistan. The study involved the participation of two head teachers, 14 teachers, and 20 students from Grade VIII. Research tools such as interviews, focus group discussions, school observations, and document/artifact analysis were utilized to gather data.

In terms of understanding the cultural politics and the role of pedagogy, Giroux (2000, p. 342) highlights Hall's perspective that "culture plays a central role in struggles over meaning, identity, and power." Building upon this literature, the critical discourse analysis model proposed by Fairclough (2009) was employed for data analysis. This approach recognizes that the production, dissemination, and consumption of discourse are intricately linked to power relations. By situating the text within both the immediate and broader social contexts, the true meanings embedded in the discourses can be revealed.

4. Findings

In the cultural history of Baltistan, music has held significant value in social and cultural life. However, in present-day Baltistan, particularly within schools, music is not appreciated and is actively discouraged and silenced. Negative perceptions towards music have been fostered, and there is a notable absence of musical elements in observed school rituals and celebrations.

An incident in School A exemplifies this negative attitude towards music. A teacher reported that musical instruments found in the resource kit for Early Childhood Development classes were collected, broken, and discarded by another teacher, citing religious reasons. When this incident was reported to the headteacher, the response was dismissive, further reinforcing the negative behavior towards music and musical instruments within the school. By exerting control over cultural resources, schools effectively suppress possibilities for cultural expression. One senior teacher in the same school expressed, "Our (Islami) culture has no concept of music." However, when questioned further, she acknowledged that rhythm could be included as part of poetry, indicating a limited acceptance of music in the form of poetry.

Another teacher's response was even more alarming, stating that although there is no official ban on music in schools, societal backlash and severe consequences would follow if musical activities were allowed. This highlights the severity of perceived public perception and response towards music. Interestingly, this teacher was the only research participant who personally liked music and could play a few instruments, raising questions about the underlying factors contributing to such a threat perception. Similar views were shared by another participant, who stated that there would be significant problems if any musical activity or romantic song were performed in school. It is possible that Muslim preachers have imposed restrictions on music, leading to a general aversion towards it, both within society and within schools.

Dunne, Akyeampong, and Humphreys (2007, p.51) argue that schools are not solely defined by physical conditions and resources but by multiple sets of relations enacted by people within specific local contexts and cultures. In the case of music, multiple factors appear to influence school processes, with the religious clergy holding considerable influence and perceiving music as a sinful act. Other indirect and

hidden factors, such as the ideological state apparatus and repressive state apparatus, may collaborate with religious elements as counter-cultural forces. During this study, evidence of this partnership was observed, particularly in school ceremonies. However, direct evidence regarding music was not obtained. Nonetheless, the analysis indirectly suggests the functioning of potential ideological state apparatus and repressive state apparatus mechanisms in determining the selection of items for school ceremonies and co-curricular activities. The choices regarding "what to present and what not to present" and "what to offer and what not to offer" as learning experiences are not solely determined by the curriculum and official policies but are also influenced by the people within specific local contexts. Through analyzing these responses, the intensity of potential consequences and signs of underlying conservative forces and mechanisms become apparent, particularly concerning local cultural manifestations, especially music.

During the focus group discussion (FDG) in School B, students revealed that there were a few musical instruments present in the school, but they were not allowed to use them under normal circumstances. Additionally, the students mentioned that they didn't have access to these instruments. When asked about their usage, the students mentioned that they were only used on national days (such as Independence Day or Pakistan Day) with national songs.

The perceptions of students regarding music were mixed, with girls expressing softer views compared to boys. Some girls believed that light and soft music could be allowed in ceremonies like the 14th of August. In the girls' group, a few students disagreed, several supported music, and a few remained silent. On the other hand, the responses from the boys' group were contrary to the girls. The FDG responses indicated that teachers did not permit music and there was a ban on singing. One student during the FDG expressed, "Music and Khulu is haram (forbidden), it is sinful. Our religious scholar (clergy) says it is sinful. Urdu and Balti songs are all haram" [PSB(FGD)]. The student emphasized the word "haram" (sinful) seven times while discussing music. None of the other students expressed disagreement. There could be several reasons for this situation, such as the student being outspoken and confident, possibly belonging to a religiously conservative family, and the other students may have agreed or refrained from expressing their views out of respect or fear. These emotionally charged responses indicate the seriousness of the matter. When a teacher says "people will attack" if music is allowed in school, it speaks volumes. The overall situation reveals more in its silence than in what is explicitly said.

According to Foucault's perspective, the unsaid or the "never-said" reveals more than what is explicitly stated. The manifest discourse, or what participants openly express, is actually the repressive presence of what is not being said. During the FDG, one boy even rejected *qawali* and *naat* due to their musical content. Regarding Balti songs, the students mentioned that the singers of khulu (Balti romantic songs) are not respected and are considered insolent [PSB(FGD)]. However, the students did not disclose who informed them of this perception, why the singers are viewed as insolent, and how long this perception has existed in history. Literature and the socio-religious and political history of Baltistan may provide answers to these questions, but they remain part of the "never-said" history.

Several teachers and groups of students stated that music is not allowed from an Islamic perspective, as it is considered haram (sinful). Only two teachers shared a more appreciative view of music. Female teachers generally discouraged any form of music in school, with the exception of national songs. The FDG with the girls' group revealed a moderate response, suggesting that music could be included in school events (rituals) involving national songs and *qawalis*. Three students believed that music should be limited to polo matches and other cultural events outside of school.

Upon analysis, it appears that school policies and governance are influenced by powerful stakeholders within the local community. Dunne, Akyeampong, and Humphreys (2007, p. 51) affirm that "policy implementation has been shown to be influenced by local stakeholders and can result in unregulated discriminatory practices. While local education offices have an official monitoring role, there is little evidence of their involvement in policy implementation." The dominance exhibited by the influential boy during the FDG and the fear expressed by the teachers are indicative of the influence of external stakeholders in school governance and processes.

5. Discussion

Upon analyzing the findings in relation to school processes, it becomes evident that the governance of the school suppresses music. Governance, as defined by Hirst and Thompson (1999) in *Education Governance in Pakistan: An Indicative Study* (nd, p.9), refers to the control of an activity by various institutions and practices, both public and private, state and non-state, national and international, to achieve desired outcomes. In the context of schools, governance is reflected in curriculum organization, financial management, personnel management, resource allocation, resource usage, site-based management, and implementation practices (Ainley, 2000). As mentioned earlier, all school activities are controlled to achieve specific outcomes. This study observed that opportunities, resources such as musical instruments, time allocation, and permissions are all controlled to prevent music from being part of school co-curricular activities.

Contrary to the cultural history of Baltistan, which has a positive view of music, the data from this study presents a different picture. Female students and male teachers appeared to be more open and positive towards music, while the majority of female teachers and male students had extremely negative responses. It is necessary to investigate further why teachers' perceptions differ from their students. Overall, the responses suggest that music should not be included in any school activity except for national songs on specific occasions. Some respondents expressed their liking for light, soft music but believed that allowing music in school could lead to extreme consequences.

The prevalence of the traditional orthodoxy that considers music as irreligious and un-Islamic seems to be spreading in schools, either due to the dominance of conservative religious clergy in society or due to school processes and teachers' approaches. There is a subtle surveillance and administrative control in schools to silence music, especially local music. The fear and threat expressed by the English male teacher, who stated, "If such things happen, people will attack us," indicates a deep sense of fear from an unidentified source referred to as "people." During an interview with a senior teacher at School A, the response of "Asthaghfirul-llah" (I seek salvation from Allah) before sharing views was unexpected from an educated and responsible professional. It was as if the word "music" itself was taboo. However, when this response is considered within the immediate school context and the broader socio-religious context of Baltistan, the scenario becomes clearer.

The response of "music permissible with national songs only" is intriguing. Even those who consider music "haram" see no harm in national songs (*millinaghme*). In other words, while certain religious beliefs do not permit music, national (state) ideology can make music "halal" or permissible. This contradiction is an inherent aspect of the Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 1971). Both religious and state hegemonies collaborate to suppress local voices and diversities, particularly cultural expressions and values that possess significant potential for resistance.

The almost complete absence of musical elements, whether local, national, or international, in school events, the prohibitions, personal perceptions, practices, and preferences all align with regards to music. The dominant influence of religiosity concerning music will inevitably lead to the disappearance of traditions, practices, knowledge, instruments, interest, and appreciation for music. Such a situation may give rise to a more mono-cultural ritualistic environment and repressive practices. The use of emotionally and religiously charged

words such as "haram" (forbidden), "sinful," "not allowed at all," and "Astghfirul-Allah" (I seek salvation from Allah) in relation to music has significant implications for the preservation and development of the musical dimension of culture. If these circumstances persist in all schools, where local music is deliberately silenced, the very essence of Balti culture will be at risk of extinction.

The discourse surrounding music encompasses both deliberate and spontaneous responses, reactions, and practices. As Foucault (1969) suggests, we should be open to receiving each moment of discourse as it emerges, recognizing its temporal nature and its potential for transformation, erasure, and concealment. Rather than tracing discourse back to a distant origin, we should engage with it as it unfolds in the present (Chapter 3). The spontaneous responses, particularly the use of Arabic religious phrases, reflect the current state of affairs.

In present-day Baltistan schools, the cultural identity of children is being undermined, including their language, poetry, and all forms of music. This situation risks overshadowing the melodies, love, and peace that are symbolized by the flickering lamps of late nights, which still hold the power to ignite hope. The overall approach of school processes and governance towards local cultural expressions and music can be summarized by the following passage from Foucault (1982, p. 787):

...the resources of communication and power relations constitute regulated and concerted systems. Take, for example, an educational institution: the disposal of its space, the meticulous regulations which govern its internal life, the different activities which are organized there, the diverse persons who live there or meet one another, each with his own function, his well-defined character—all these things constitute a block of capacity-communication-power. The activity which ensures apprenticeship and the acquisition of aptitudes or types of behavior is developed there by means of a whole ensemble of regulated communications (lessons, questions and answers, orders, exhortations, coded signs of obedience, differentiation marks of the "value" of each person and of the levels of knowledge) and by the means of a whole series of power processes (en-closure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidal hierarchy).

This study proposes policy recommendations to promote open learning opportunities for all students, particularly in the realm of cultural aspects. The findings suggest a redefinition of education and learning, taking into account both past and present circumstances, with the aim of fostering a more harmonious and melodious future. It is recommended that music be introduced as a cultural and scientific phenomenon that does not undermine any religious beliefs, but rather contributes to the enrichment of cultural affiliation and aesthetic appreciation. Music should be reintroduced as a form of "cultural capital" rather than being perceived as a religious burden. By embracing music, we have the potential to cultivate cultural identity through the melodies of peace and harmony, rather than succumbing to the extremism of religious orthodoxy and a lack of respect for diversity. Extreme views and perceptions towards music and poetry, particularly regarding *khulu* and local music, should be softened through educational initiatives and media platforms. Failure to address these issues may lead to the emergence of aggressive extremism, even in this otherwise peaceful region.

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