The role of music is instrumental in defining, maintaining, and transforming indigenous culture, identities, and rights. Indigenous cultural, spiritual, and sociopolitical identities are shaped by music and vice versa. Music is fundamentally connected with indigenous cosmology, language, and elements of nature. Studies of indigenous music question and examine how the loss of traditional culture, language, and ancestral land are influencing the voices and expressions of underserved populations, particularly in the era of globalization. Contemporary practices that treat music as a consumable commodity and a mere mode of entertainment undermined deep-rooted connections of music with natural elements and human agency. This entry discusses the role that indigenous rights play in the preservation and practice of indigenous music.

Institutional Protections of Indigenous Rights

Historically, indigenous people across the globe experienced oppressions and social injustices, which posed challenges to their identities and existence. Such scenarios fundamentally called for taking adequate measures to protect indigenous rights. After World War II, various international institutions undertook initiatives to protect and promote the rights of indigenous people of the globe. In the context of human rights, several declarations emerged, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. These declarations essentially sought to guarantee rights of work and property as well as cultural practices such as artistic productions. In 1989, Article 4 of the International Labour Organization convention paid serious attention to the cultural and religious rights of the indigenous people and emphasized the full realization of indigenous cultural rights. Finally, in 2007, the United Nations (UN) brought forth the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to secure indigenous peoples’ cultural and human rights.

The identities and expressions of indigenous people are deeply rooted in as well as constructed by their contexts such as ancestral lands, environment, and traditions. It has been observed that indigenous worldviews, human values, and cultural artifacts oftentimes flow from one generation to another. Such cultural interactions are instrumental in creating and sustaining social cohesion and building consciousness among the indigenous community members. Such intergenerational indigenous communication of culture is often informal, intangible, and organic in nature. Scholars have argued that many of the cultural expressions, customs, and heritages need to be preserved in order to prevent them from decay or extinction. The aforementioned UN declaration was a major step for promoting indigenous rights in individual as well as in collective contexts. The declaration emphasized protecting and strengthening indigenous institutions and heritages. Some of the key goals of the declaration were ensuring indigenous peoples’ rights to participate in decision-making processes and build their own decision-making bodies; securing indigenous rights to their traditional medicines, health practices (both physical and mental health practices), and spiritual practices; and promoting indigenous rights to land, forests, water bodies, and territories. In the context of culture and performativity, the declaration plays a crucial role; it seeks to protect indigenous rights to visual and performing arts. The declaration argued that indigenous people have the rights to develop, control, maintain, and protect their traditional expressions and heritages including oral traditions and performing art forms.

Other UN organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) took measures to safeguard indigenous cultural traditions. UNESCO noted that in order to create avenues for social transformation, society needs to promote the notion of care, love, and respect, and create spaces for meaningful dialogue among stakeholders. Such steps, according to UNESCO, are instrumental in eliminating contextual threats and destruction of indigenous cultural praxis. Apart from the above initiatives, some other organizations such as the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium actively contributed to the research and policy writing activities for the indigenous populations of developed countries like the United States and New Zealand.
The Role of Music in Indigenous Land Rights

Music may be a tool for legitimizing indigenous rights, such as land rights, that essentially emerge from indigenous identity, knowledge, survival, and space. For instance, the Temier, one indigenous community in Malaysia, was disenfranchised and became landless owing to interventions of the state and dominant powers. In response, the indigenous people raised their voices against the hegemonic oppressions to claim and protect their rights for their lands, forest, and mountain. In order to challenge and resist the state discourses and agendas, the Temiers composed and performed several songs, namely fruit songs and mountain songs, among others. Community participation in those songs essentially sought to legitimize their political, social, and cultural identities. In the context of contemporary land and resource negotiations, their songs question the dominant praxis as well as foreground their identities, rights, and the contextual sociopolitical and environmental issues.

Australian aboriginal songwriters and performers have also raised their voices reclaiming their traditional land rights. Such songs essentially challenge Australian government policies on land rights as well as existing racial and ethnic relations. In recent years, aboriginal popular musicians are assuming important roles in communicating their messages on aboriginal rights, identities, and empowerment. They espoused traditional ways of narrating oral history for performing the songs to contemporary audiences. Thereby, they embraced discrete musical strategies to legitimize their demands for indigenous land rights.

For many indigenous communities, land rights are fundamentally tied to their cultural and spiritual praxis. For example, musical articulations of the indigenous community of Dukuduku, South Africa, showed their connectedness with their lands and spiritual cosmologies. Historically, people of Dukuduku were forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands and successively relocated to unfamiliar geographic regions. Such dominant interventions severely affected their lifestyle; for example, poverty and urban migrations were some of the realities of their existence. Their musical performance was deeply rooted in their sociopolitical experiences, spiritual, and cultural memories. Similarly, in Australia, aboriginal music is fundamentally invested in ancestral land and natural resources. The songs and dream narratives of the aboriginal people profoundly pay attention to their association with cultural and spiritual entities, while also questioning the interventions of contemporary neoliberal economic and political policies.

Protecting and preserving the environment and nature is another important indigenous right, which was expressed through indigenous musical expressions. For instance, the Suyá people of the Upper Xingu of Brazil consider that interconnectedness between music (and other communicative acts) and nature provided them the avenue to realize the significance of locale and their roots. Through their musical journey, they reflexively narrate the relationship between social organization, rituals, customs, and indigenous cosmology.

The Role of Music in Indigenous Cultural Rights

Another important aspect of indigenous rights is cultural rights. Owing to colonial and other dominant interventions, many of the indigenous music traditions were erased from the discursive spaces. One such incident took place in Qu’Appelle Valley region of Canada, where the local Cree residents recall their memories about “little people” and their musical traditions. Scholars have noted the little people used to play water drums as a part of their spiritual practice. Local Cree people reported that since 1940, the sound of water drums were not heard and eventually the music tradition disappeared. Researchers concluded that the little people did not disappear or die, but their musical expressions were suppressed by the dominant interventions.

In the context of cultural rights, scholars have explored the close interactions among culture, contexts, and human agency. One case study focuses on the aboriginal women and children of Borroloola, an island of northern Australia, where people reside in poor housing conditions and suffer from diabetes, malnutrition, heart diseases, alcohol, and substance abuse. While negotiating such adversities, women sing and share
songs, which serve as an empowering experience for them especially to foreground their rights for health and development.

See also Human Rights, Music and

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