

The Arts

Catalyst for Social Change

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**“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”
(Mandela)**

INTRODUCTION:

Issues facing indigenous and minority peoples are more than just an economic problem, it also involves injustice. “Injustice does not merely deprive people of their fair share of the education, health, employment and material resources of the world. It deprives them of dignity and honor. Oppressed people who must constantly labor (and) do not create any improvement in their lives, lose their belief in their own capacity... and lose their hope that life could be better. Subjugated people begin to accept the prejudiced view that other people hold about them. It is the apathy and extinction of hope which has come from the world’s acceptance of materialistic systems...” (14)

We close our doors and hide from the caustic effects of racism because they are too difficult to resolve. We close our eyes and ears in order not to see or hear the anger and pain of oppressed people. It is all too tragic. We have created a false sense of security and well being that, as long as we are on ‘our side of the fence’, the ‘lower life’ or ‘contaminants’ of the world will not infect us. It is much easier to blame them for their condition and everything else in life that doesn’t go our way. We have become indifferent. Most individuals have not taken any action personally to remedy the situation and have become paralyzed with apathy and lethargy. Even with advanced technology and wealth, the truth is that life is not getting any better for the majority of people. Life is even difficult for many who come to the U.S. believing it to be the ‘land of plenty’ or who have lived here but are pushed to the margins of this society. We are colorblind if we don’t see the ‘faces of color’ in America and refuse to seek out their friendship and participation; sharing in the responsibility of human affairs.

Where do we go from here? Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.” Fanon believed that a “violent revolution is the only means of ending colonial repression and cultural trauma...” Dubois’ firm conviction was that “capitalist society is altogether evil... [and] to finally solve the problem of racism, to really solve the problems of

poverty, and to secure peace to the world's peoples, humankind must, sooner or later, come to the conclusion that this old structure is beyond effective reform." Shoghi Effendi stated that if this situation is not corrected it would lead to "the burning of cities and the spread of terror and consternation in the hearts of men... which will devastate, wreak, and create... global havoc." I used to think that what Abdu'l-Baha said, "Blessed are the nameless and traceless poor, for they are the leaders of mankind," (Tablets of the Divine Plan) meant that the 'nameless and traceless poor' would become leaders only after they are educated and learned how to lead. But I now think what he meant was that they are already leaders whose innate capabilities are being strengthened through suffering and struggle and whose innate abilities are *already* characteristics of their minds and heart. Having money, power, status, and education are not requirements for leadership. By unlocking the capacity of the downtrodden we free them "from oppression and unjust relationships". (14) They must not be silenced or turned a deaf ear but they must be given a voice and be able to engage in active and ongoing consultation. Through consultation we create inter-dependence, thereby "realigning the relationships of people in society... redefining power in society." (14)

If we look at our workplaces, churches and government do we really see cultural diversity in its leadership? To balance power there must be more than just a few 'token' minorities, in prominent positions of leadership and decision-making. We must encourage their confidence to be leaders. It is their voice and attributes that will greatly enrich this country and help it avoid chaos. It is of urgent importance that the American Negro and American Indian, along with Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders and other minorities become a part of the decision-making process at all levels in the social systems of this country.

Indigenous peoples through their arts of poetry, literature, story telling, crafts, music and dance have been telling us for centuries who they are and how they feel. In the following pages you can hear the voices of two indigenous cultures trying to be heard. They must be encouraged to continue to tell their stories and to not be afraid of being censured or ostracized, and continue to nurture one another while seeking to learn about the larger society in which they live.



Igniting the Fire of Service Through the Arts

*"Through all the sorrow... there breathes a hope...
a faith in the ultimate justice of things."
– DuBois*

This paper, describing the tapestry that is **Project 99** and *Pa'Ndau*, is interwoven with commentary on the importance of art, interspersed with social and political observations, and accentuated with descriptions of *Pa'Ndau*'s dramatic plot and production. The opening scene of *Pa'Ndau*, depicts a young girl's flight to freedom and sets the stage for telling a real life story of refugees who, like a majority of the world's population, live in a constant state of 'surviving', while both 'living' and 'dying.'

One of the strong cohesive components of **Project 99** is the use of the performing arts. The arts have always been a powerful catalyst in the transformation of individuals and society. The arts awaken, sensitize, direct, and energize 'noble sentiments' that uplift, change and improve the human condition. Jung pointed out that "the difficulties and problems faced by contemporary civilization are never solved by legislation or tricks. They are only solved by a general change of attitude. And the change does not begin with propaganda and mass meetings or with violence. It begins with a change in individuals..."

Project 99, a social and economic development project for youth and children in California's Central Valley, is named after Highway 99 that runs north and south connecting the major cities in this area. This valley has become one of the richest farming regions in the history of the world, as well as one of the most culturally diverse areas in the nation. The valley is "450 miles long and typically 40 to 60 miles wide, encompasses 18 counties with a total of more than five million people and more than 42,000 square miles—one sixth of the population and more than two-fifths of the land area of the state." (California Research Bureau) A majority of the participants in **Project 99** are the children of Southeast Asian refugees who came to this country after fleeing Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge regime of Cambodia. Since 1975, the United States has admitted more than 1 million Southeast Asian refugees of which many have settled in California's Central Valley.

Project 99's first stage production is a musical drama called *Pa'Ndau*. The name is derived from a Hmong word meaning 'flower cloth.' This drama boldly affirms that the 'plight of refugees' holds promise for the survival of the human race. In the eyes of its eager young performers shines a hope for a society of both peace and prosperity. With their adventurous spirit to create and their eagerness to participate on the stage, and a desire to build a better tomorrow, they give new meaning to this 'pulpit' and platform of advocacy. Here, music, dance and drama becomes the vital motivation for collective action in deeds of service to family and community, giving support to the idea that the arts are the greatest non-violent solution. Gandhi said that non-violent action is "mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man."

SCENE ONE - The 'flight': A solitary flute is heard as a young mother with her child is seen fleeing through the fields near the Mekong River. The mother, mortally wounded, falls to the ground. Her daughter, a child of about 7 or 8 years, through a flood of emotion, tries to lift and encourage her mother to continue their journey.

Silence falls upon this impending separation and death. No words, only tears. Before dying the mother holds her child for the last time and gives her a pa'Ndau cloth that records the history of her family and village. She encourages the child to keep moving, to escape and survive, but to always remember and honor her cultural past. The child embraces her mother for the last time, then continues to flee.

Life conditions in third and fourth world countries are tragic: people face war, poverty, food shortages, homelessness, and lack access to medical care. Even in more prosperous countries you could be 'margined out' because of your 'blackness', your economic level, or failing to 'assimilate.' The suffering and subjugation of human life is appalling and leads to hopelessness and despair.

Historically, art has mirrored society, interpreting our position in the universe reflecting social, cultural, and spiritual dynamism of struggle, conflict, collaboration and conciliation. Art has been an inseparable part of indigenous people's historical, psychosocial, and spiritual identity. In their art, "man" worships the Creator and the creation, relives centuries of dialogue, honors ancestors, establishes cultural heritage and participates in communal activity. In the world of their art, nature, man and the hereafter are one and are made sacred. Traditionally, "sociologists have concentrated on the economic, political and historical elements of the art world" (2) and how it affects society; while artists have sung, danced, and acted out every conceivable human and social interaction that could ever take place on the stage of life.

The arts in Western market economies have been drenched in materialism and self-gratification. Capitalistic countries emphasize the merits of art for its intellectual, aesthetic, therapeutic, monetary, and entertainment value; while in most indigenous communities, art voices resistance to oppression and is a cry for liberation. They have a 'voice' and they want it to be heard. For most indigenous peoples, the arts remain survival tools and cohesive forces within their communities.

An ongoing reality is that colonial practices still exist causing irreversible harm to many indigenous and minority peoples and to the evolution of their cultural arts. International declarations aimed at preserving and protecting indigenous peoples' cultural expression and their right to pursue their own cultural development, including the creation of their art, means nothing if attitudes and actions do not change. Some countries see these peoples as an 'irritant' to the dominant culture that exploits them for profit and gain. Even government, religious, and corporate organizations who uphold principles of multiculturalism, tolerance of diversity, and a belief in the 'oneness of humanity,' continues to call on minority peoples to fulfill their agenda. They parade or display them on stages, in media and in advertising as tourism novelties, or to fill quotas or to avoid the criticism of public opinion without consideration of their voice. Their cultural expression is dictated and measured against a dominant standard that seemingly has no interest in their well-being and continues to market them as an indigenous commodity.

When countries open trade to businesses, artist entertainers are often invited to help smooth negotiations just like religions send out missionaries and artists as 'circus attractions' to 'win over' converts. Artists are always present in the military helping build morale. For example, during the Vietnam War the U. S. military hired performing artists to help in building morale among the troops, encouraging pilots of B-52 bombers and entertaining the wounded in military hospitals. On Guam

artists were hired to bring ‘calm’ to the ‘tent cities’ housing nearly 80,000 Southeast Asian refugees who had fled during the fall of Vietnam. This is the power of the arts.

Art, as “the signature of civilizations” (Sills) expresses the organic unity of humanity’s collective experience. The art of indigenous peoples is the fruit of their civilization. By exploiting indigenous and minority peoples, we distort their artistic cultural expression, missing not only the wealth of knowledge and ideas of their cultural past but we inadvertently affect our own cultural expression and fate as well. For we are forever linked in a creative circle of human experience, meanings and relationships.

The objective of the *Pa’Ndau* drama is “to awaken” indigenous and minority peoples’ native sensibilities, to overcome their acceptance of defeat, to motivate and rehabilitate society and to “use the past with the intention of opening the future, an invitation to action and a basis for hope. (By ensuring that) hope (and giving it form, we) take part in the action and throw (ourselves) body and soul into the national struggle. (We can talk) about everything under the sun; but when you decide to speak of that unique thing in man’s life that is represented by the fact of opening up new horizons, by bringing light to your own country, and by raising yourself and your people to their feet, then you must collaborate on the physical plane.”(5) Pa’Ndau speaks to those who hold positions of authority, in effect saying, “leadership is action not position.”

“To take part in the... revolution, it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves, and of themselves. In order to achieve real action, you must yourself be a living part of... their thought; you must be an element of that popular energy which is entirely called forth for the freeing, the progress, and the happiness... There is no place outside that fight for the artist or for the intellectual who is not himself concerned with and completely at one with the people in the great battle of... suffering humanity.” (Sekou Toure) (5)

Pa’Ndau is a cherished and revered form of artistic expression in needlepoint depicting patterns and stories of everyday village life of the Hmong. Newer versions of the story patterns recount the traumatic exodus of Hmong people from their tribal homelands in Southeast Asia to new countries. Having no written language until recently these story cloths were the only way for them to relay history and to retain their cultural identity. One youth stated “I was carried in a pa’Ndau baby carrier when I was born, it means my heritage, my culture and my life. It is an art that never dies.” (9) Many Hmong consider the pa’Ndau their ‘Freedom Banner.’

The young performers participating in the stage production of *Pa’Ndau* are the children and youth of refugee families. They brought to the stage the heritage of hundreds of years of life experience, memories and emotions to tell the story of the most tragic event in their families’ lives - the horrific torment and grief of the Vietnam war, the incalculable loss of lives, and the eventual betrayal by the United States. This war devastated so many lives of so many families. Through the dance, music, and song of *Pa’Ndau*, we tried to convey the visceral impact of the tremendous sorrow and pain that words alone are powerless to do.

SCENE TWO – The Bamboo Cage: The child, now grown into a beautiful young woman, weaves her way through a maze of dancers with bamboo sticks which depict the materialism, racism and inequalities in her new home country. She feels trapped and in an emotional prison, unable to free herself. The background music and chant, The Broken Word, is a Black spiritual written by an indigenous Hawaiian artist. The song “testifies to the reality of a society that accepts, builds and works from a foundation of lies and untruths.” (Toshi Reagon) The lyrics cry out, “Another man broke his word. The truth could not be heard. Somebody’s gonna have to pay, And it looks like you and me.” (Reagon) The sounds are of hollowed out bamboo, and drums, voices of protest, “striving for freedom and justice, and the realization of a collective self – a peoplehood, [it is] the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.” (DuBois) As the scene continues the young woman, overcome by delirium in this maze of evil, falls to the ground exhausted. She reflects on where her life has taken her and remembers the pa’Ndau cloth given to her by her dying mother. She searches for the pa’Ndau, unfolds it and buries her sorrow in the memory of her family and her village. She falls asleep and dreams of happier times.

The cast and volunteers worked together to create the costumes, props, and stage scenery for *Pa’Ndau* with very little funding. Many items were made from ‘recycled’ materials. The ‘bamboo poles’ were not real bamboo but the discarded cardboard center rolls removed from bolts of yardage that were painted to look like bamboo. The tubes were remnants from of a South East Asian women’s sewing project.

Unable to sew for a living, Hmong women are occasionally hired by American business for assembly line work “because of their skills and training in needlework, embroidery and other domestic crafts,” and for supposedly “having a ‘natural’ aptitude for detailed handiwork” giving them an advantage over men in tasks requiring high levels of manual dexterity and accuracy. Also, women are supposedly more passive - willing to accept authority and less likely to become involved in labor conflicts. The Hmong women working has caused a real conflict in the Hmong home, in that “great numbers of Hmong immigrant men in America are, in fact, unemployed. They are not in the position to discourage their wives from making money, but because of their wives’ greater earning power here, it is a shock to men who had never doubted their own male leadership powers back in Laos [Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam]. Middle-aged male immigrants believe that many of the health problems their groups suffer here, including Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome (of which 99 percent of the victims are male), may be attributed to the stress of this new gender inequality.” (6)

It is ironic that, on the national level, social issues are increasingly concerned with safeguarding wealth rather than people. In contrast, the families and children of Project 99 are faced with real ‘life and death’ situations including below poverty level subsistence, unemployment, welfare and lost benefits, western health care practices insensitive to shamanistic healing, elders contemplating suicide to not burden their families, increasing single-female headed households, and continued post traumatic stress syndrome.

These social forces of "ghettoization and poverty are not the creations of the poor, but are the result of processes controlled by economic and political forces far removed from the ghetto and the poor themselves... poverty, ghettoization and crime were, finally, symptoms of institutional and structural racism." (DuBois) Racism is not just a black and white problem or an issue of the have and have-nots. It "encompasses not only prejudice, but any action or characteristic of social systems that supports race privilege, regardless of whether people intend that to be the result." (Wellman)

SCENE THREE – The Village Dream: While she sleeps, the young girl dreams of dancers with colorful fans, ribbons and parasols, and of young men in mock battle. They are celebrating the village New Year. It is a time to share the meaning of community - festivities, family, friends, food, music and dance. It is a celebration of life, longevity, survival and solidarity, celebrating what is truly Hmong – to be free. ('Hmong' translated is 'free man.'). The backdrop is a series of pictorial slides depicting the faces of the refugee families in their native country, young and old, people at work on their farms, women in sewing groups, and youth and children in school and at play. Three memorable backdrops showing the Mekong River valley, American city life, and a building depicting the future refuge for a tottering civilization were painted by the youth.

The 'American' identity is one that is firmly rooted in the philosophy of individualism (Alger)(11) while the Hmong are rooted in and have strong feelings for their community. For many immigrants, assimilation into a new country is painful. One leads a "double consciousness" life in which his ethnic identity is in a state of constant validation. He carries a 'double burden of expectation of the culture he lives under and the culture of his biological community.' (DuBois) (11)

SCENE FOUR 'E O Mai' – Please Answer Me: All the members of the community come together to reaffirm their relationship. Shown metaphorically to be joined by water (wai) and represented in the hand and arm movements of the hula. "Water was a most precious resource in ancient times, and is prominent in Hawaiian poetry when referring to emotion or romance. This song uses the many qualities of water as metaphors to reflect the feelings and actions that embody relationships." Waiwai is the Hawaiian word for wealth. (Reichel)

The Southeast Asian youth learned to dance the hula with respect and admiration. This art form "is a story of ritual and poetry, beauty and belief. It honors the traditions from which it has evolved, combining aesthetic choreography and epic poetry and chants (mele) that are rooted in Hawaiian consciousness." (12).

The missionaries who settled in Hawaii in the 1820s denounced the hula. The missionaries 'marked' the Hawaiian women as 'savage and impure.' The missionaries were determined to crusade for their lost souls, "the souls of the heathen, they often told themselves, were of incalculable worth." They were committed to raising the status of Hawaiian women to their own presumed level of sexual purity and dutiful submissiveness." (3) The 'savage' Hawaiian women and hula dancers were covered from

head to toe with yards of material to hide their bodies. They came to understand that their whole identity was one of being impure, dirty and unworthy. “Every effort (was) made to bring the colonized person to admit (to) the inferiority of ‘his’ culture, ...to recognize the unreality of ‘his’ nation, and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of ‘his’ own biological structure.” (5)

More troubling is the psychological rape of a culture not only by religionists but by privileged dominant colonial capitalist who continue today not only to exploit their lands and natural resources but also exploits it women, its culture, and the Hawaiian hula, “a kind of prostitution for economic gain. Without beautiful Hawaiian women dancing, there would be no tourism” (13) and the entire economy would collapse. Tourism “defines a Hawaiian woman as an object of degraded and victimized sexual value for use and exchange through the medium of money. Hawaii is itself the female object of degradation, our lands (aina) are no longer the source of food and shelter, but rather the source of money. Tourism converts the art of the hula, and the generosity and love of our people, into profit.” (13) “Under these circumstances, the consumer expects the minority [culture] and cultural products to be novel and exotic.” (10)

While tourism is the highest income producing industry in the State of Hawaii it profits at the expense of Hawaiian culture and its men and women. Unemployment has been reported to be the highest among native Hawaiians. Living below the poverty level, while surrounded by wealth and a high cost of living, is a reality. Hawaiians are suffering irreversible long time effects of inequality and oppression shown by alarming health statistics. Among all ethnic groups represented in the state of Hawaii, native Hawaiians suffer the highest number of incidences of every major physical and social disease; cancer, heart disease, hypertension, tuberculosis, alcoholism, mental illness, high infant mortality, teen pregnancies, school drop outs, welfare recipients, incarceration, and suicide.

“This creates an unequal situation of interdependency where the dominant ones can expand and be self-sustaining while the subjected ones can only reflect that expansion.”(7) This keeps a culture in continuous ‘underdevelopment’ as it pays “due homage despite its own material and cultural deprivation,” (10) and leads to an “inferiority complex” which “leads to sensitiveness... to a feeling of being encroached upon, of being wronged. This leads again, through the mechanism of compensation, to the rejection of every form of dependence, to resistance against every form of subordination, to... strengthening of self-consciousness and to non-cooperation.” (8)

What lives devastating epidemics of the 1800s did not take, colonialism was taking the rest. As a missionary wrote of his converts who were dying from the diseases brought by the traders, “We bless the Lord and take courage but, oh, what a dying people this is. They drop down on all sides of us and it seems that the nation must speedily become extinct. (Gulick 1918:159) [We must convert them and this] must be done quickly.” (Lyman Journal 1838) (3) What is alarming is that religions and churches continue to assert this position rather than being of true service to indigenous and minority peoples. Even America, the ‘land of the free’ where all ‘are created equal’ is failing in its responsibilities.

SCENE FIVE Finale – Unity in Diversity: The performers come back to the stage – teens, mothers, babies, brothers, sisters - nearly 65, both cast and crew. Music sounding triumphant is playing – we have overcome the obstacles. A large 10ft by 12ft pa’Ndau is carried to center stage and unfurled. It depicts the Mekong fields,

villages, and a river along the left side; the Pacific Ocean, boats and airplanes with people traveling East in the middle, and the new world, America, with what it has to offer on the right. It looks like a road map of the past and the present. We see that a portion is not yet sewn - a future yet to be written.

CONCLUSION:

The ideal situation in any development project is for the request for assistance to come from the population rather than through the imposition of aid by people who assume what is needed. **Project 99**'s planning began as the 'natural stirrings at the grassroots' rather than as an 'imposition of plans and programs from the top'. This project evolved from an earlier request by a Hmong leader for assistance with the education of their youth. *Pa'Ndau*'s artistic expression tapped the talents and abilities of a population of youth, sparking enthusiasm, creativity and confidence, which encouraged them to become more involved in the social and economic life of their community. The performing arts of music, drama, and dance became food for the soul and gave flight to the spirit.

EPILOGUE:

This affinitive and volatile combination of youth, the arts, and the story that is *Pa'Ndau*, captured the hearts of all involved. The arts are 'a natural cultural developer' and a catalyst that can ignite the fire of service within each of us. Dance, music, and drama is "a celebration of the fact that we do contain within ourselves infinite possibilities." (Lewis) This medium is not tangible but fragile yet intensely powerful. It is a precious gift that "imparts solace to the world...will last forever and endure the revolution of ages and centuries." (Abdu'l-Baha)

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