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Creating a Space and Place for Culture Bearers Within Tertiary Institutions: Experiencing East African Dance Songs in South Africa

Setting the Scene: South Africa

Since the introduction of democracy in 1994, there has been much social, economic, political and educational change in South Africa. An aspect of that change in schools and universities is to be inclusive of multicultural education and practice. In a diverse and post-apartheid South Africa, Vandeyar (2003) claims, “an ideal form of multicultural education is one that not only recognizes and acknowledges diversity, practices tolerance and respect of human rights, but works to liberate cultures that have been subjugated” (p. 193). Prior to 1994, African music and culture was marginalized in education settings, it now plays a vital role in shaping the nation’s identity.

South Africa is a country that boasts eleven official languages, many ethnicities and religions, so there is no one specific culture or music. Hence “it is impossible to speak of culture in South Africa as if it was a unitary, stable all-embracing umbrella term” (Dos Santos, 2005). In post-apartheid South Africa, the recognition of formal and informal teaching and learning is part of the social fabric of the country thus strengthening the inclusion of African music as part of multicultural content (Fredericks, 2008).

Prior to democracy, African music and culture were not readily included in the mainstream curriculum at schools or tertiary institutions, still such “musical practices were successfully carried on in informal musical life” (Thorsén, 1997). Universities are now more inclusive in promoting pathways for students to learn about African music and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). According to Nompula (2011) “South African music educators have come to realize that indigenous music is as valuable as western music” (p. 369).

IKS is concerned with knowledge that belongs to, and is transmitted by, a specific ethnic group, and is also concerned with common practices that are indigenous to a specific area in which a designated population lives (Joseph, 2005). The World Bank (2003) identifies IKS as a multi-faceted concept incorporating “traditional or local knowledge”. Ntuli (2001) refers to IKS as representing organizational and cultural leadership systems, institutions, relationships, patterns and processes for decision-making and participation that have been identified by indigenous people. Given the complexity of this multifaceted phenomenon it is difficult to isolate a single, commonly-held definition of how IKS might apply to music. Indigenous knowledge is generally passed down from one generation to the next. Similarly, music and dance are usually learned through oral and aural traditions incorporating cultural rituals and story telling. Nompula (2011) “confirms indigenous music is an oral tradition that aims to transmit culture, values, beliefs and history from generation to generation” (p. 372). Music is prevalent in all African countries as part of day-to-day living. Africa is the second largest continent with 54 countries (World Population Review, 2013). Due to the diversity of language and culture over this large area, there is no particular model of
IKS for music although commonalities do exist between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. The wealth of knowledge and skills of indigenous culture bearers in informal settings in African communities plays an important role in the transmission of IKS.

This paper focuses on the importance of including culture bearers within tertiary institutions as their knowledge, skills and understandings contribute to the teaching and learning of African music within music tertiary courses. In October 2012, a space was created for a culture bearer to teach indigenous East African music and dance onsite within a music unit for the Diploma of Music and the Bachelor of Arts at North West University (NWU), South Africa. African music at this university was introduced under the leadership of Professor Kruger and Dr Petersen in the School of Music where it continues to thrive. Over the years, they have taken their students on field trips to Vendaland to learn from local people about Venda music and culture.

I regularly re-visit South Africa, my country of birth, to undertake research and professional development in African music to inform my teaching practice in Australia. I have introduced African music into my teaching units at Deakin University (DU) in Melbourne since 2001. As a tertiary music educator, I employ a pedagogy that connects culture, society and history to the musical arts of Africa. Time restraints prevent in-depth teaching in all types of African music, so students only experience a limited range of music and dance of the African continent in my teaching units.

**African Music**

Music permeates every aspect of African life and plays a definite role in the life of the people. Music and dance are inseparable and form a partnership in African culture. Music-making in African society has a social function; unlike western culture, people in Africa perform music with each other, rather than for each other. Music is used to entertain, to accompany dances, plays, religious ceremonies, traditional rites and to mark special events such as birth, death, marriage and puberty (Warren, 1970; Agawu, 2003). African music is closely associated with language and the same word can have a number of meanings depending on its pitch. Tone languages permit music to be used as a form of communication. For example, the talking drum relays messages through different pitches. The music of Africa may be classified into traditional, that is, passed down orally and aurally and often requiring percussion instruments; and contemporary, that is sharing many of the characteristics of western popular music in the mid-twentieth century (Agawu, 2003; Prouty, 2006).

In African societies, song and dance are the medium through which children and young people receive instruction about traditional customs and practices, obligations and responsibilities. Dance, drama and music co-exist as equal partners in African culture. Green (2011) firmly upholds “there is no dance in Africa that is without some form of music, even if it is the voice or simple hand clapping” (p. 230). Through music and dance, a sense of community forms bringing together dancer, musician and audience. According to Miya (2003) “no one can claim to know everything about music in Africa. African cultures are so diverse and so is their music” (p. 2).

In this paper I argue that there is a place for culture bearers within educational settings. Belz (2006) points out that if non-western music is to be learned and studied, it should be “with a member from that culture” (p. 42). Hence the employment of Julius
Kyakuwa, originally from Uganda, was timely for students at NWU to experience, engage and explore indigenous East African music and dance. Kyakuwa is an authentic culture bearer, performer, teacher, composer and choreographer who presented four workshops at NWU during the time of my visit in 2012.

**Background: North West University**

With a footprint across two provinces, approximately 112km drive from Johannesburg, NWU is a multi-campus university that is one of the largest and oldest universities in South Africa. NWU has a strong focus on indigenous music. The School of Music has an ongoing policy to invite culture bearers to share skills and expertise with students and academics, and offers a short-term residency in order to enculturate students and lecturers about indigenous East African cultural practices, values and principles. Such sharing provides culture bearers the opportunity to transmit much needed skills that are not often offered by academics. UNESCO (2012) identifies scarce knowledge and skills as an intangible heritage. The initiative to include Ugandan music as part of the teaching and learning workshops on African music at the School of Music was funded by the South African Music Rights Organization.

The aim for undertaking research at NWU was to observe and experience the intense focus on indigenous music in the School of Music. Firstly, I wanted to extend my understanding of African cultures and musics, and secondly, I sought new strategies on how to teach my students at Deakin University. My visit to NWU in October 2012 was timely as at that time it was employing a visiting artist/culture bearer from Uganda to undertake four workshops with the Diploma in Music and Bachelor of Arts students (18 students in the class). I attended three of the two-hour workshops (14-18th October 2012) and the concert performance. These workshops culminated on the 18th October with a public performance where the students showcased what they had learned in the workshops. The performance and participation at the workshops formed part of their music assessment on African music.

The culture bearer (Julius) shared his passion, enthusiasm, expertise, skills and knowledge with tertiary students and lecturers. Julius is a qualified teacher with eighteen years experience as a performer, music educator, master African drummer, African dance instructor and choreographer. This authentic artistic experience is important and necessary when teaching musics and culture that are different from or unrelated to the students’ world of experience (Seidel, Eppel & Martiniello, 2001; Titon et al. 1992). According to Gordon et al. (2002), professional development should be based on the ideas and knowledge from outsiders to enhance new pedagogies that are site-based (Lieberman, 1995). The pedagogy of teaching from the culture bearer and teacher was based on the informal pedagogy of observation, imitation and emulation (Petersen, 2004).

The workshops, with Julius as artist and expert, provided “an authentic and effective learning experience for students and also for teachers to learn from” (Nethsinghe, 2012, p. 68). The teaching and learning of African music requires an understanding of the cultural system, the creative principles of the music and the method by which that music is transferred from one person to another. This way of teaching and learning is best experienced onsite. Although the students were all black South Africans with the exception of one white student, they were not familiar with
East African music and dances nor was I. Learning indigenous East African music and
dance was new, different and challenging for all of us. A culture bearer allows “students
to have access to quality music education” (Sinsabaugh, 2006, p. 176), and an
immersion into a different music and society. Clements (2009) suggests that the culture
bearer is the best option as s/he has the necessary knowledge and skills to provide an
authentic experience that is tied to cultural knowledge. The culture bearer has “an
insider’s view of the culture” (Erwin et al., 2003, p. 135).

Methodology

As part of a wider ongoing study that commenced in 2010 (Attitudes and
Perceptions of Arts Education Students: Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers
Across Two Continents (Australia and South Africa)), I used reflective practice, a
personal journal and a questionnaire to inform my case study. At the end of the fourth
workshop, students were invited to complete a 10-minute questionnaire regarding the
East African indigenous music and dance workshops. There were six open–ended
questions (for example: Why did you enjoy the workshops? What did you learn? What
aspects of the teaching/pedagogy were new or different or hard to do? What were some
of the challenges?) Out of 18 participants, 13 students completed the anonymous
questionnaire. I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative
methodology to analyse the questionnaires. IPA is inductive and has no pre-existing
hypothesis (Hefferon & Ollis, 2006). As the researcher, I was responsible for the data
gathered, making sense of the “stories and experiences in a meaningful way with a view
of learning more about humankind” (Shaw, 2010, p. 233). The case study provides a
snapshot of African music teaching and learning that took place during the October
2012 workshops at NWU. I used IPA to interpret the data in order to “illuminate the
meanings and experiences of the participant” (Pignato, 2013, p. 23). In a case study,
Atherton (2013) argues that one is able to reflect in action (while doing something) and
on action (having done it) through keeping a journal. As a tertiary music educator, I see
myself as an “agent of social change” (Katz, 2008, p. 42) and am exhorted to reflect on
ways to improve my African music teaching for students in Australia. Banoobhai (2012,
p. 177), writing specifically about South African teachers, makes the point that it is
important to know what we do and why we do it. Loughran (2002) similarly holds the
view that we need to be reflective about what we do and see our “practice through the
other’s eyes” (p. 33) in order to make our teaching meaningful.

Workshops: Indigenous East African Music and Dance

The culture bearer (Julius) expressed the view that indigenous music and dancing
in East Africa showcase the diversity of traditional folklore in art forms like poetry,
games, storytelling, ritual singing, dancing and playing instruments. Through these
practices one is able to have some understanding of the people and their way of life.
Music and dance are passed down from generation to generation through oral and aural
traditions. During the four music workshops students learned five songs and dances.

Each dance told a story, which was initially explained by Julius before he taught
the moves of the dance and words of the song. His mode of instruction was through
imitation and call and response, typical of African music teaching. Julius had an
amazing way with words to motivate and engage the students; he was passionate,
extremely fit and energetic and loved what he was doing. He was fun and exciting as a presenter. Students commented after the workshops that his sessions “were exciting”, “fun and different”, and “it was interesting and it took us out of our comfort zones”. I was amazed at how quickly he got the students to perform five dances and songs in public. The pressure was certainly on him and his students.

Each song was taught in tandem with the dance and with instrumental accompaniment. Not all students danced for each of the songs: some played on instruments (drum, bells and shakers) though all students learned the songs and sang when they were performing. Having taught predominantly white Australian students, I observed just how much easier it was for these students to learn these Ugandan songs and dances, as some of the moves were similar to local indigenous dances of South Africa. They were eager to learn something new and different and keen to perform their five dances and songs.

Dances

The first dance, called Agwara was from the Kebu people in the West Nile region in Uganda. This area borders Congo and the southern part of Sudan. Agwara is a procession folk dance of the Lugbara people that is used for mobilisation, community celebrations and ordinary entertainment on many occasions at local or state functions. In Sudan both men and women perform this dance. Agwara derives its name from the wooden trumpets that mainly take the lead of the music accompaniment. However, in the absence of the magwara, other accompaniment forms are used that include songs, ululations and chants, playing on shakers, drums and log xylophones.

The second dance, called Larakaraka, was a courtship dance performed during wedding ceremonies by the Luo, Acholi people of northern Uganda and parts of the Southern Sudan. Different villages organise important ceremonies to help young people court and prepare for marriage. It would seem that the best dancers find the best partners, hence a competitive, show-off dance in order to attract young ladies. In the Acholi culture, if a male dances poorly, he is most likely to remain unmarried. In this particular dance, the calabash symbolises the fragility of marriage. If held and played well, it cannot break but if handled carelessly, it easily breaks. The male holds and dances with the calabash and if the female accepts the calabash, it is a good sign that she is willing to accept his proposal for marriage.

The third dance called Mwaga was an initiation dance of the Bagisu people. The Bamasaba tribe lives around the border of the eastern region of Uganda and the western region of Kenya. In Uganda this dance is called Mwaga, and in Kenya the Luhya people call it Tiriki. In both traditions when boys become men, there is the practice of male circumcision.

The fourth dance, Kimandwa was a traditional worship dance for the god Okubandwa of the Bahiru people of South Western Uganda. The locals believe this dance places the god at the centre of good relationships and the community. Whilst some members of these communities still perform the dance and its songs in its original context, it is also performed outside this environment in schools, festivals and for entertainment.
The fifth dance, Gaze, can be categorised under the contemporary dances of Africa. Originating from the Lingala speaking people of the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is now performed by various tribes around the border areas of northwestern Uganda, Southern Sudan and the eastern Congo. Gaze is mainly a waist dance and the harmonious singing is part of the accompaniment and intricate drumming. This dance requires much flexibility in its rhythms and body movements and is mainly performed by young people.

Discussion and Findings

From my observations, questionnaire data and anecdotal discussion, Julius brought much freshness to the teaching unit. He was new, passionate, exciting, humorous and encouraging. He taught something different and generated excitement. The purpose for inviting an artist was to “provide students with experiences from which they can construct their own understandings of music, education, and music education” (Wiggins, 2007, p. 36). As a tertiary educator, this aspect was crucial for my own learning: “good teachers are also learners, and they recognize that they need to keep learning throughout their careers if they are to improve” (Nieto, 2003, p. 76). As a learner in this situation, I was challenged through the teaching and learning experiences in which I was involved (Loughran, 1996, p. 27). Learning a new language and movement is not easy, yet students quickly learned the songs and dances. The students seemed to want to impress Julius. They did not want to let him down as was evident in their long hours of practice after the workshops. They also seemed competitive and wanted to impress me, the Australian visitor. They were happy, excited to be in the class, energised and keen to learn the new songs and dances. Getting them to move and sing at the same time did not seem an onerous task. Comments like “the tutor was patient with us” and “though the choreography was a bit hard we ended up catching it” summarised the students’ willingness to participate.

Part of the rationale for employing Julius was to give students hands-on opportunity to “develop an initial repertoire of teaching competencies, comprehend the various dimensions of music experience and understand student learning” (Campbell & Brummett, 2007, p. 52). Although African music is taught in the School of Music, East African songs and dances were new and different for all. The four workshops as short-term professional development, were one of the keys to learning to teach because they allowed pre-service teachers to learn from each other and offered an environment where changes in belief about music teaching might occur (Conkling, 2007, p. 48). When students were learning their dance moves and/or rhythmic accompaniment to the songs, they taught and helped each other through imitation and rote learning. They also conversed in their local African language to explain what was to be done, though the medium of instruction was English. With the incentive of a public performance, where children from the local Ikageng community would also perform, the students learned quickly.

During the concert, it was enriching to see both tertiary students and school children perform to an audience, where the local community and university had initiated a space and place for the interchange of indigenous music, dance and culture. This partnership, which had been present for many years, formed an important aspect of the teaching and learning of indigenous music. The university students commented on the excellent standard of the performance by the school children and, in a similar vein, the
children were also impressed and inspired by the songs and dances performed by the university students. This exchange of recognition was evident in the long applause and ululation received at the end of each dance. To the surprise of the audience and tertiary students, the culture bearer at the end of each dance called out a few students and questioned them about their learning and performance. This may have been a way he assessed and self evaluated the outcomes of the workshops.

Although the teaching and learning took place in a formal setting, students informally experienced the teaching processes of the culture bearer. Comments from students such as “it was totally different from the dances we have done in South Africa” and “learning new things about indigenous music and dance was different”, suggested students learned ‘hands-on’ about a new country and its music, dance and culture. The activities in the workshop aligned with features of informal learning in the sense that they were activity based, organic and collaborative (Beckett & Hager, 2002). The hands on practical activity engaged students in a very real way that they would not have experienced had they learned from a textbook or a video. Students commented, “learning the dances and performing it together was fun”, “we learnt how to do the dances by watching the instructor”, “we learnt by rote and imitation and by doing it” suggest an informal way of teaching and learning within a formal setting. The students added “it was challenging to learn different movements and remember the dances” and “he taught us about his culture”. The teaching aspect, though, was still formal in the sense that it considered the ends and means. This happens according to Jenkins (2011) when the teacher has a particular outcome in mind and “applies instruction strategies designed to effect a change in the learner; whereas in informal learning the learner engages in some activities for the sake of the experience itself” (p. 184). In a similar sense the children from Ikageng who performed on the day learned in an informal way (out of school) from their teacher. A student commented, “by learning from culture bearers like Julius we learn about other countries and we share the spirit of being African”. This exchange fosters the opportunity for community and tertiary students to share their experiences when learning about new music and culture (Koopman, 2007). Having spoken to the community teacher at the end of the concert, as I was most impressed with the children’s skills, he said “they have a strong sense of commitment and to want to learn and aspire to perform so that they one day can go places and study at the university”. He further added that the pathway with the university gives “the children the opportunity to perform in front of university students and audience, it motivates and encourages his work with them and helps to keep the children off the street”.

Conclusions

The inclusion of a visiting artist can be seen as an agent of social change to encourage students to learn of another music and culture like that of East African and the university prides itself on partnerships with the local community where authentic teaching and learning takes place. Although the majority of the students were indigenous (Black South African), the engagement with music and culture of East Africa was a novel experience for them as well as academic staff. The interaction promoted diversity, respect, and understanding and fostered intercultural and cross-cultural dialogue. Whilst the focus was largely on Ugandan dance songs with instrumental accompaniment, the teaching and learning pedagogy is similar to that of indigenous South African music (Dargie 1996). I contend that the inclusion of culture
bearers within tertiary courses have an important role and place in the transmission of IKS in tertiary institutions. The success of the four-day workshop on another music and culture proved a worthy, successful experiment and experience for all.

As music cultures are never static, culture bearers serve as a pathway to connect local community and pedagogy, bringing the informal into formal educational settings. I argue that the inclusion of cultural activity, that is, the informal pedagogy of indigenous musics, within the formal context of university courses provides opportunities to connect local community and tertiary institutions to celebrate the rich diversity of African music. Involving knowledgeable, authentic, indigenous culture bearers, like Julius, within formal institutions, proved to be an effective outcome for students, tertiary educators and audience. It is hoped that lessons learnt from NWU can be replicated elsewhere.

**Acknowledgement**

I wish to thank Julius Kyakuwa for allowing me to use his programme notes about Indigenous East African Music and Dance supplied for the concert held at North West University Conservatory (South Africa) 18 October 2012.
References


