# A new voice in a new place: Musical encounters with a difference

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**Abstract**
Australian education providers at the university level are being challenged to be more inclusive of cultural diversity and associated knowledge systems in their curricula. This article reports on some findings of a research study that aimed to evaluate the introduction of African music to primary teacher education students and to provide them with a context for assimilating African music into their own teaching practice. This paper reports on my work as a music educator in sharing my different worlds of experience 'with one voice' in order to expand students' local knowledge base. It also discusses the nature and applications of African music and demonstrates some aspects that correlate with Western music. Through a study of both Western and African pedagogies and repertoire, students were able to gain a more holistic perspective of the role of music in society and were able to contextualize and transfer epistemological and pedagogical insights from one society to another.

## Background

As a South African, now working with Australian teacher education students, of predominantly Anglo-Celtic background, I place myself within the curriculum areas of teaching both music education and education studies to undergraduate and postgraduate students, at Deakin University, in Melbourne.  Having taken over responsibility for teaching a music education subject to undergraduate students in 2001, it was evident that the students had been exposed almost exclusively to Western music and Western curricular knowledge systems. Part of the challenge in my teaching as an academic at Deakin University was to revamp this music education subject and to introduce students to Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), specifically African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK). Another challenge that I, together with other academics faced was to reclaim 'quality' in the pursuit of Deakin University's transformative education agenda, in terms of teaching, research and service. This article reports on a research study that aimed to identify and evaluate the outcomes from introducing African music to primary teacher education students and providing them with a context for assimilating African music into their own teaching practice.

## Recognising the need for change

Higher education in Australia is going through a period of significant change. One aspect of this change is the incorporation of globalisation and internationalisation policies into higher education. These policies are being applied in relation to student mobility, both to and from Australia, and to curriculum development. The incorporation of IKS is seen as a way of internationalising the curriculum and making students aware of other existing knowledge systems. This inclusiveness is seen as relevant, innovative and responsive to the need for a greater respect for cultural differences in systems of knowledge production and use, which is now part of Deakin University's Mission Statement (Deakin University 2003). In the main, it may be argued that the focus on teaching and learning for music education in Australia has been dominated by Western thought and knowledge systems, and some major reforms are now due. A growing number of pressures are now being placed on universities to internationalise the curriculum as well as increase their international student and staff numbers. Part of this internationalisation is what commonly called "knowledge pressure" which addresses the changing modes of knowledge production and utilization.

For the purpose of this paper, "internationalisation" is defined as "the process of integrating

an international/intercultural dimension into teaching" (Knight and de Wit 1995). As part of Deakin University's Strategic Plan, internationalising the curriculum ensures that all "teaching programs provide learning experiences that encompass international and intercultural perspectives and experiences and support a culture of diversity and inclusiveness" (Deakin University 2003). According to Sadiki (2002), Australian education providers are well placed to be leaders in internationalised education and to match the academic standards of peer institutions in other countries. The incorporation of African music into an Australian context could be seen as tokenistic, suggesting an imbalance between Western and African music. However, when musical product is used to explore the context of African music, such contextualisation is intended to overcome the problems of tokenism and, in reference to this, Goodall (1992) contends that, when meaning is absent, tokenism results. In her opinion it is only when we move beyond our own and into the other's frameworks that we begin to contextualise the other's thinking. It is within such a framework that I placed my teaching of African music.

My teaching of African music to Australian teacher education students was intended to encompass both  content and pedagogy**,** as well as promoting cross-cultural understanding. The latter intention is supported by Oehrle (1991a) who argues that we also explore cross-cultural possibilities more fully, richly and critically than previously, by exposing students to other cultures and music. She further states that "a growing awareness of other cultures is not only more possible but also necessary to achieve …" (p.26). The use of African music in my teaching was seen as empowering students' abilities in improvisation and creativity and, by extension, their learning, understanding and skills. Part of the challenge of rethinking my teaching and curriculum structures was not only to prepare students for a specific and well-defined profession (primary teaching), but also to prepare them for active participation and adaptability in a world where change is inevitable.

### Between three worlds: Cultural identity

Having lived in South Africa for more than three decades, being of Indian descent, and growing up during the years of apartheid, I find myself placed between three worlds—Indian, Western and African. I therefore chose to position myself as having a predominantly endogenous rather than indigenous perspective. Ntuli's (2001) notion of "endogenous" refers to the indigenous knowledge that is received from other sources outside the original. This "received knowledge" has been assimilated and integrated into my indigenous perspective to the point that it has become part of what Ntuli refers to as a "collective heritage". The values, beliefs, and cultural and educational systems of South Africa have had a profound effect on my sense of belonging. Hence my "outer" and "inner" experience is constantly challenged in my study and understanding of the music and culture of Africa, and in communicating it to my Australian students.

South Africa, like many other African countries, has been colonised and, due to its rich tapestry of peoples, does not have a single cultural identity. It is commonly known as "a rainbow nation" for this very reason. Adding to the difficulty of defining a national identity or common ancestry is what Gilbert (2002) refers to as the then "erosion and imposition of Christian missionaries" and more recently to the "onslaught of cultural globalisation". However Gilbert (2003) further contends that the experience and understanding of one culture can aid in the understanding of another. I position myself within such constructs and view the concept of culture as having many dimensions and understandings.  My view is supported by Thorsén (2002, p.2) who affirms "a person can express a double or multiple belonging to cultural groups" The construction of such a multifaceted belonging is "a balance between security from the cultural 'home' and the courage of seeking along new trails"). In my own teaching and research, music goes beyond curriculum content and methods; it also promotes attitudes and understanding of the role of music education in African society, thereby fostering a curiosity for and knowledge of "the other". This is in accordance to *A Statement on the Arts for Australian Schools* (Curriculum Corporation 1994) which advocates that the arts help shape cultural identity and give life to the beliefs and traditions of cultural groups. Music and music education can thus be viewed as a bridge between many "cultural worlds" and may provide a

reference point for maintaining what Miller (1989) calls a "society's moral fabric". This refers to the notion of music not having an independent life of its own, but rather being part of daily life where language, culture, dance and music are interwoven and one plays *with* someone or makes music *together* rather than playing *for* someone.

**Perspectives on African indigenous knowledge systems in music**

Africa, as a large continent populated by people from different ethnic origins, represents a diversity of cultures and traditions and poses many challenges for those who seek to identify a uniform approach to issues confronting the continent based on a uniquely African perspective. One of the major issues confronting African philosophers, historians, anthropologists and educators is the proposal that African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) should become more prominent, particularly in a society such as South Africa which has only recently become emancipated from a Western-imposed apartheid system and **now** wishes to reclaim its indigenous heritage and traditions. The notion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (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. IKS may even be interpreted as "traditional knowledge" that is based on cultural identity. It is also identified as a multi-faceted concept by the World Bank (2003) which refers to it as "traditional or local knowledge". Ntuli (2001) refers to IKS as representing organisational and cultural leadership systems, institutions, relationships, patterns and processes for decision making and participation that have been identified by indigenous people. Given so many interpretations, it is difficult to isolate a single, commonly-held definition of how IKS might apply to music. Miller (1989) aptly points out that Africa has not had the opportunity to "settle into a classical system of music" in the Western sense due to the disrupting influence of colonisation and the subsequent oppression in terms of social and economic development and the imposition of outside influences, both musical and extra-musical. To use Nzewi's (1999, p.72) phrase, European colonisation has been responsible for "a radical, de-culturalising process which continues to produce a crisis of cultural inferiority [and] mental inadequacy…"

Several authors have written on the nature and role of music in indigenous African societies, in the course of which, the often illusive characteristics of AIK (African Indigenous Knowledge) in music begin to emerge and take a more tangible form. Westerlund (1999), for example, identifies some of the essential differences between African and Western musical traditions which highlight the musical, social and pedagogical dimensions of AIK in music. Although there are many that could be cited, I offer three perspectives on indigenous African music that relate specifically to IKS and to the transmission of musical traditions through community-based learning.

Firstly, a feature common to all African indigenous music is rhythm, which engages all members of a group to respond to it in a social situation. This feature has been described as a "coexistence of different, simultaneous rhythms conflicting and yet being in balance illustrates the dialogical pluralistic situation" (Chernoff 1970, cited in Westerlund 1999, p.97). This pluralism in turn creates a strong sense of community and therefore a highly interactive mode of learning (knowledge transmission). African music as a shared rhythmic experience is what Oehrle (1991b) refers to as something one responds to in a social situation and again identifies it as being "profoundly pluralistic". This pluralism is not often recognised in Western music. For example, Miller (1989) states that the cyclic nature and complex poly- and cross-rhythms of African music sound strange to the "linear ear". This "difference of sound" that Miller speaks of was certainly experienced by my students' "Western ears" but the act of participating in an African drumming ensemble allowed them to experience something of this musical and social "pluralism".

Secondly, in contrast to the predominantly visual orientation of Western culture and its logical extension towards the imperative for musical literacy, indigenous African music has relied entirely on an oral tradition of transmitting musical knowledge, which is learnt through highly interactive social events and rituals where music is the predominant means of communication

(Westerlund 1999). Westerlund cites the views of Anyanwu (1987) who also asserts that, unlike European thinking that is grounded in seeing and the visual perception of reality, African culture is based in hearing and listening as an alternative way of knowing reality. Indeed, sound becomes a model for reality through the spirit of *ubuntu* which represents the indigenous African way of thinking and living through music.  Westerlund then goes on to reinforce the point that, for Africans, music signifies the social sharing and participation that actively summons a human being towards life and living.  Accordingly, each place and its people have their own oral traditions which, in the case of Africa, have become merged and blurred with the comparative lack of fixed boundaries.  The indigenous people in the context of South Africa, for example, have lived continuously as organised communities, having common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits. These people perceive music as fulfilling a central function in their lives but, for a Westerner, it is difficult to see how music can form such an integral part of life. In the case of such musical experience, Miller (1989, p.3) points out that, to the African, music making is to play "with someone, than for someone", which is generally not the case in Western music. This point is also well made by Westerlund (1999, p.97) who states "for Africans, music signifies social sharing and participation in the most forceful way so that the performer and the product are inseparable".

Thirdly, unlike music within the Western context where music is "spiritual, mental, intellectual or emotional", Westerlund (1999) contends that meaning within indigenous African music only emerges in the context within which it has its being. Nketia (1962) observes that African music is integrally connected to the social structure and presumably also to the social context within which it exists. In contrast to Western culture where music is seen as an art form, as individualistic and personal in terms of its appreciation, and as an intrinsically-based aesthetic experience, music is so much an integral part of African indigenous life that it represents the very act of living.  According to Westerlund (1999, p.97), unlike the Western conception, "music is not a singular intellectual happening or a profound aesthetic experience in an individual's monological brain", but rather it represents a means through which people can collectively "recognise and judge what is valuable in social and personal life" (Chernoff 1970, cited in Westerlund 1999, p.97). Blacking (1971) in his study on Venda people and their musics speaks of the difference of sound relating to "music making as symbolic expressions of social and cultural organizations", which reflects the values and the past and present ways of life of the human beings who create it. Hence, to a far greater extent, African music—unlike Western music—has a dual role whereby it represents both patterns of social and cultural action and patterns of sound.

Although there is a need for more research and scholarly debate to enable more precise identification and articulation of how IKS relates specifically to music, the aspects outlined above formed sufficient basis for my development of a new unit of study on African music and culture for a group of primary teacher education students and for ongoing research into its effects on these students.

**African music in a teacher education context**

For the purpose of my music education curriculum, I focused specifically on the lives and culture of the Zulu, Sotho and Xhosa people in South Africa. One of the problems I faced in transmitting AIK in this context to my students was the dilution of traditional knowledge and practices through acculturation. Songs learnt were initially studied as oral repertoire so that the subject matter and context allowed for comparisons, contrasts, variations, and similarities to be discussed. Such a multidisciplinary approach allowed for the incorporation of AIK, which in turn, encompassed local knowledge that is culture-and-context specific. Moreove**r,** the pedagogy that I employed focused on non-formal knowledge that is orally transmitted, which correlates with traditional African ways of transmitting knowledge.  Given this context, I sought to introduce the music and culture of the above mentioned African people to my Australian students who came from predominantly Anglo-Celtic cultural backgrounds. In 2002, thirty-one students undertook my music education subject for generalist primary teachers and thirty-five students undertook the subject in 2003. In both years, the music subject focused on

established Western pedagogies (Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze) as well as African music. I used a variety of both Western and African songs as my primary teaching material (see Joseph 2002). These songs were initially studied as oral repertoire and the subject matter and context were discussed which allowed for comparisons, contrast, variations, and similarities to be identified. The students were fascinated when contrasting the African understandings and learning styles with the Western tradition. As part of the subject, students were engaged in singing, moving, playing instruments, dancing and dramatising the content of the songs. This intercultural perspective provided a nexus between Western and African ways of knowing and consolidated my fusion of music, dance and movement. This multidisciplinary approach also incorporated AIK, which encompassed local knowledge that was culture-and-context specific. Moreover, the pedagogy that I employed focused on non-formal knowledge that is orally transmitted which correlates to traditional African ways of transmitting knowledge. It is dynamic, adaptive and holistic in nature (UNESCO and NUFFIC-CIRAN 1999).

**Research procedure**

The objectives of my research-based teaching program were to introduce students to AIK, and to then identify attitudinal changes, levels of motivation, confidence and competence of the students studying music. For the purpose of my research, two types of data informed the results of my study—an anonymous questionnaire and interviews with self-selecting members of the student cohort undertaken at the end of Second Semester in 2002 and 2003. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: general background information regarding their existing levels of music skills and knowledge; questions on their perceptions and understandings of the Orff, Kodaly, Dalcroze and African music approaches, and questions regarding students' levels of motivation, confidence, competence and enjoyment of African music as cross-cultural engagement. The focus of this article is on reporting aspects of students' engagement with African music. Due to the small sample of students responding to a questionnaire which employed Likert-scale responses (twenty-nine from thirty-one students in 2002 and twenty-eight from the thirty-five in 2003), only inferences rather than statistically-validated conclusions were able to be drawn. The questionnaire for 2002 and 2003 was intended as a 'snapshot' of the class regarding their experiences of the workshops through which the subject was taught. Only a small percentage (on average 25%) of the class volunteered to be interviewed in both years. All interviews were conducted by myself and utilized a schedule of semi-structured questions that were based on issues emerging from the questionnaire data.

**Opening doors down under**

I use the phrase 'opening doors Down Under' to describe the resulting snapshot of selected interpretations of students' understandings of African music and culture and the impact of these understandings on their knowledge base. My students were not international students. Rather, I was seen as the 'international voice' as only three students from the 2002 and 2003 cohorts had any first-hand experience of Africa and then only as tourists. By promoting African culture, society and music, doors were opened which encouraged dialogue across cultures so that students became both sensitive to and infused with intercultural perspectives on music and society. This interpretation is supported by Miller (1989) who states that "understanding the differences not only opens the way to a deeper appreciation of the people who create and use that music, but it also brings perspective to the Western musical world". Starting with my cultural background as a South African, it appeared that my "insider" knowledge and insights helped my students learn more about the music and culture of African people than had I been an "outsider". One student commented:

> It is different just hearing about it on the TV or reading about it but having you here with us make music and tell us about the people and their lives and the stories behind the songs has made the experience enriching and really has motivated me to learn more about it … we see your passion for it.

Another student remarked:

> You brought your personal knowledge and personal experience to it as well, it wasn't something that you just read about, that you weren't being related to us, it was something that you had experienced and been part of and could share with us and you obviously had a great passion for it.

One student commented that having an enthusiastic lecturer of South African origin enriched the experience even more.

> Because you [the lecturer] were always so excited about it and it sort of made us excited to learn and see what was so exciting … It actually motivated me to want to go to Africa.

IKS was a new domain for all students, as one student remarked:

> We're also on a level playing field, 'cause all of us had different backgrounds in music but, when it came to something like African [music], very few of us—in fact none of us—have had the opportunity to actually play it and be a part of it and move to that type of music.

The use of an unfamiliar genre like African music not only motivated students to participate in the workshops but generated an interest in and an understanding of a "new culture" as the student quoted above made obvious. Through practical classroom activities and viewing of videotapes, the students gained both an appreciation of and experience in music and movement as important aspects of African music: "We had no idea just how important music is in Africa…and how one learns about life, history, traditions, customs through engaging with music and dance".

For Australian students from predominantly Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, the concept of AIK was conceived as "new", "different", "fun", "exciting", "stimulating" and "interesting". AIK was seen as being a significant resource which had been brought into the mainstream of the students' current thinking and had given them a broader perspective of knowledge, skills, competencies and camaraderie in terms of their music making and learning. This was experienced mainly through song, movement and drumming: "We had such fun … we also learnt a lot and we generally participated in the music making activities".

It was fully apparent that students learnt more when they were having fun and when they were engaged with a practical "hands-on" approach—that correlated with the informal way of learning in AIK as well as to the Orff concept of making music which is so important in Western pedagogy. Orff uses speech patterns and improvisation that resonates well with the African pedagogy and repertoire. Amoaku (1982, p.118) asserts that, of all the contemporary trends in music education Orff's pedagogy is perhaps the closest to the traditional ways that Africans learn about music. Amoaku (1982) also notes that there is a correlation between the essentials of Orff's approach (the use of speech, rhythm and movement) and the traditional African concept of music making. It is from such premises that I developed and expanded the teaching of African music from my experience as an Orff practitioner.  As one interviewee remarked:

> It's because there wasn't such a lot of just talk about the principles, though it was in the main theory-based, well minimal theory-based or application, all hands-on, all doing, all learning through doing.

Another student commented:

> I really enjoyed the drums and beat and rhythms and things, so I really got into it. It was fun, fun to move to, fun to get up and dance. That's what teaching should be about [to] …—having fun—and learning comes from fun.

Having included both Western and African music in the curriculum meant that students had the opportunity to work from the *known* of their own Euro-centric music to the *unknown* of African music. This also reinforces one of the basic pedagogical principles - cross-cultural understandings emerged through the use of both Western and African musical repertoire and pedagogies. For example, students began to perceive that both cultures employ songs and song texts to convey significant meanings. It is through such comparisons of repertoire that students gained a fuller understanding of the wider African culture. This was aptly

summarised by one student who said:

> When you saw that English translation [of the words of the song] … you could still see why they would have sung and it was good 'cause we don't really have these kinds of songs in English in Australia. You don't see the road worker starting to sing songs. It was good to get another culture, another feel for the culture.

Another response aptly encapsulates the view of a new genre to learn about music and culture:

> I didn't have any idea … The closest idea I had to that was may be I thought they would sing for rain … I didn't have an idea they sung about other things. They sung when they work they'd sing about healing and things. I guess they [were] so involved in singing and movement about their whole life style—it's all included in that and we would never do anything like that.

**Conclusion**

The research data from this study revealed that the incorporation of African knowledge systems into an Australian teacher education course was highly successful. Students benefited from this 'new' experience and, having someone from Africa teach it, seemed to authenticate their experience. Students were highly motivated to learn about African music as they gained a greater understanding and appreciation of an unfamiliar genre and culture. As suggested by Thorsén (2002), such experiences develop attitudes and understandings of the wider role of music and music education in society, which I maintain was fully realised by my students, who gained a far greater understanding of the African culture than they would have through less authentic experiences. They certainly came to an appreciation of what Nketia (1998) identifies as the discovery of common principles, usages and behavioural patterns that enable a synthesis of their intercultural understandings. Such a transfer of knowledge, skills and repertoire from traditional environments to contemporary settings maintains and strengthens what (Nketia n.d.) refers to as the "Africa artistic experience". Nketia further points out that this results from having an "affinity or fascination with Africa [as well as] making inroads into its cultural treasures or engaging in dialogue with African scholars and artists".

The use of African music as a fully participatory mode of teaching and learning empowered my students to exercise their creativity and, by extension, their learning, understanding and skills through a discovery of, and interaction with, AIKS. This introduction of African music represents a significant innovation to Australian generalist teacher education and may be seen as an example of effective teaching of IKS in music education that is worthy of emulation. Such an example would also be applicable to Indigenous Knowledge Systems in many other discipline areas.  Australia, like several other countries, faces the problem of being in an 'ivory tower' regarding what Keller (1994) refers to as the "the coexistence of different cultures, large and small, that cannot anymore ignore each other as they often did in the past". Given the situation in Australia where Aboriginal culture is not as widely shared across the general community as indigenous culture is in South Africa for example, IKS in music developed within Aboriginal culture has had little impact on Australian music curricula in educational settings. The ultimate value of applying IKS to the field of music education in Africa as well as in Australia is what Masoga (2003) refers to as "connecting the disconnected". Masoga (2003, p.5) further argues "African music education should deconstruct existing boundaries and re-order these channels and boundaries, linking and connecting them for the purposes of advancing the dignity and integrity of the local people". I fully support Masogo (2003, p.5) who contends that "African music education should be about life, for the continuous improvement of the quality of life". Australian education providers at all levels are therefore being challenged to provide inclusive and culturally-diverse curricular as part of an ongoing process of internationalisation, which is preparing students to be informed global citizens of the future.  Accordingly, the teaching of African music should be more widely adopted as an effective and highly motivational means through which to transmit musical knowledge and skills to Australian students.

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