

## **Ethnographic Film and the Teaching of African Music: A Technological Approach of Representing Past Musical Hegemonies**

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### **Abstract**

*Teaching African music in schools has not yet received adequate attention from curriculum planners in respect of the involvement of ethnographic film as a pedagogy of teaching music. Film as an aid to teaching and learning attempts to present a learning atmosphere in which music is learned in its performative and contextual state. Students are afforded an opportunity to experience music as it is used by the society to solve cosmological problems. In this article the writer attempts to justify the use of ethnographic film in the teaching of African music to students who have not been exposed to music in the society. The information that supports this article is drawn from the writer's personal experiences in the field as he was collecting data for his Master thesis recording audio-visual images. He discovered that film can play a very important role of representing a particular ethnic group's music in its totality. A teacher can bring life to his/her teaching by making use of film. Students can have an opportunity to observe the protagonists performing a particular dance in its performative state. Although expensive, the use of film in teaching indigenous music will go a long way in closing the gap between reality and theory. A lot of teaching content can then be drawn. This article will unpack the different types of content that children can be subjected to from one single ethnographic film. The information that furnishes this article was collected through desk research approach as well as face to face interviews with music lectures who teach indigenous music at Midlands State University.*

**Key Words:** Ethnographic film, audio-visual images, *mapira*, indigenous music

### **Introduction**

Before the introduction of formal teaching of traditional music in most African schools in Zimbabwe music was orally transmitted and

communally owned. Children acquired knowledge and skills in music as they interacted with the elders during traditional ceremonies like *mapira* in the case of the Shona of Zimbabwe. Music was acquired through acculturation. During pre-colonial period, that is before 1880's, the major learning methods were through inspiration, observation and imitation. In a way, this method helped in sustaining the cultural heritage endowed by each ethnic group. More so, the music handed over to them by their fore fathers inculcated a sense of homogeneity and identity in group members. The music enhanced group solidarity and a sense of belonging. It was music that worked for the people who produced it. In other words the children acquired music in its performative state. They learned music as living music and learned it as they actively got involved in performance. Learning music was not divorced from its social functionality. It was indeed the duty of the elders to ensure that the young were immersed in the spiritual and social function so that they do not only learn the music involved, but that they also master all the other events associated with music. Music was performed in context as a way of solving social and spiritual problems. With the introduction of schools, music is now taught formally and this has brought a paradigm shift in the learning of music based on western pedagogues.

In the majority of cases, traditional music is taught out of context hence making it difficult for the learners to master traditional music in its functional and efficacious state. Mere theorization, coupled with very few demonstration from an inexperienced instructor is tantamount to injustice and prejudice on the part of the innocent students who are the custodians of the indigenous music. Under normal circumstances the elders who happen to be the cultural bearers and protagonist hand over cultural traits to the young generation orally and contextually. This approach in the majority of cases has been surpassed by technology and modernization. A lot of families are no longer providing space for the protagonists to interact with the young as an enculturation process. It is the concerns of this article to advance the use of ethnographic films as a substitute the real cultural setting in the teaching of indigenous music in institutions ranging from

primary to university level as a way of preserving cultural heritage and presenting social musical contexts in their totality.

The data that informs this article is drawn from desk research conducted by the two writers at Midlands State University. The other information is drawn from one of the writers' film that accompanies his 2008 Master's thesis. The film is entitled "The spirit of Ambuya Mudevairi Speaks out."

### **About Ethnographic Film**

An ethnographic film is one that portrays events as they unfold in their natural cultural settings. The film is in some way a representation of what happens in the society. It is a scientific description of people and cultures with reference to their particular customs and characteristics. It is also a highly codified activity. It attempts in a very explicit manner to reflect on ethnographic experiences of a society. Ethnographic film is a more scientific way of describing culture from clearly defined anthropological perspectives. Ethnographic film helps in reflecting as well as producing knowledge about the range of cultures and about culture itself (Ruby in MacDougall 1978:421). A lot of information about culture can be reflected in film and the teacher can make use of such films to teach issues that pertain to music in culture.

From a technical point of view, the film is produced following an anthropological theory which is characterized by the need to film members of the society as one acts as a participant film maker. One has to stay with the people under study in order to cover them in their natural setting. The approach is derived from ethnographic paradigm. The film has to be informative and capable of providing sound content for teaching purposes. When filming music and producing an ethnographic film Zemp's (1988:303) suggestions go along way in making ethnographic films more meaningful and relevant to education. He suggests that one should film a music piece and edit it in its entirety and should strive to keep the music performance free from voice-over narration but translate song texts with subtitles. He also noted that one should film the musician as a

human being and not as thing or an insect as well as showing the relationship between the film maker and the musician rather than hiding it. Finally, he encourages filmmakers to allow expression of the musician's point of view, respecting his voice and his language through translation of subtitles. In other words, researchers should not treat the informants as objects. They should respect them and exercise ethics as well as reciprocation. Ruby(1975) once more suggested that the film should be about whole cultures or definable portion of cultures, should be informed by implicit and explicit theories of culture and should be explicit about the research and filming methods they had used. Ethnographic films are supposed to reveal and reflect "whole bodies and whole people in whole arts". Guindi (1998) confirms that all ethnographic film are suitable for classroom teaching and public lecturing. For him they are visual mediums as a recording tool of data for analysis and archival purposes. They also are medium for elicitation and discovery, can be used for experimental culture reconstructions and can be ethnography itself.

A good ethnographic film invites good camera skills on the part of the filmmaker. Zemp (1998) gave some possible technical skills suitable for filming a music piece synchronously and in its entirety which embrace the use of stationary framing, careful application of panning, tracking and tilting, skilful zooming when absolutely necessary, long sequence shooting with moving hand camera and sometimes it advisable to make use of several cameras from different angles. All these suggestions culminate in an ethnographic film suitable for teaching music in institutions.

Ethnographic film attempts to provide a sequence of events as they unfold within a selected context. For example in the film "*Chemunhikwi nemakonde*" One of the authors, tried to use sequence shorts as much as possible. He also attempted to employ Zemp's suggestions on how to take an ethnographic film given earlier on in this article. Sequence short attempt in a big way to represents the performance in its entirety. Events unfold in a sequential order as they did during the actual performance

in front of the camera lens. Such a film is multi-functional in that it can act as an archive of the recorded music, can be used for demonstrating dance pattern, can be used to teach song, can be used to trace issues of continuity and change, can be used to study instruments and more importantly can be use as a platform on which students will have a chance to observe music it its socio-functional state. According to Stone (2008) the theory of structural-functionalism encompasses the use of music in the society. It then follows that after watching a film the students are able to deduce the function of music in the society and they can draw a number of issues emanating from the film.

Steve posits that "...film could enhance research enormously in several areas such as music and motion synchrony, the relationship between performance and audience, the study of musical cueing and relations between performing, rehearsing and musical instruction..." (1976:314) Traditional music can only be portrayed in a classroom situation by the use of an ethnographic film as it goes a long way in reconstructing the past traditional living experiences. The past experiences are brought into the present and the present is manifested with a spiritual realm that resembles the past. By using ethnographic film as a learning aid, the students are able to learn a number of aspects as they watch the film. They learn as they experience and learn musical elements in their performative state.

### **Sequence Filming in the teaching of African indigenous music**

Meaningful ethnographic films are those that encompass the principle of sequence shots. Sequence shooting is a style of shooting that attempts to be continuous with very minimum interactions or stopping. Such films are suitable for teaching and analyzing dance and also for song transcription. They present the event in an uninterrupted fashion. The students are able to trace the developmental stages in the dance style as well as learning the song in its full state. They are also able to watch the event continuously without missing other parts.

Sequence shorts can also be used to produce sequence pictures which can be used for illustrations in the absence of the film.



Technique was to illustrate the processes that took place during a possession ceremony for Ambuya Mudevairi in his research fieldwork. Although several writers like Jankowsky (2007), Karim (1998), Naidoo 1995, Kovulo 1997, and Boddy 1994 provide valid information about music as it relates to spirit possession, their contribution can be enhanced by the pictures developed from sequence shots. As shown in Figure 1, the sequence pictures developed from the film can be very useful in the systematic analysis of cultural events.

**Figure 1****1****Opening song****2****Spiritual Framework****3****Spiritual Framework, *gokoro*****4****Prayer, *kupira***



Generation of trance state, *kunyaunya*

5



More seriousness and a tenser atmosphere

6



Trance state, *manyauunyau*

7



More spiritual framework

8



Total possession framework



Relationship between *mbira* modes and the spirit





### Entering the Spiritual World

*Figure 1. Flow chart for possession. (Source Matiure 2009)*

From the pictures students can trace the sequence closely. This technique enables the students to cement the pictures as if they are in motion. Because of continuous and uninterrupted presentation of a performance, sequence shots enables students to clearly analyze and transcribe songs and dance styles from the film. Transcription and analysis of songs and dance is yet another way of knowledge building in music. The transcriptions can be referred to by other scholars in who intend to study the same musical culture in future.

Sequence picture developed from sequence film can save the same purpose especially on dance and analysis of other aspects of dance styles, props, instrument distribution, traditional objects costumes and any other materials visible in the picture. The pictures also show the connection of events as they unfold in a static manner which even the actual performance may not be able to present. For instance, from the sequence pictures Figure 1 students can follow closely the events as they unfold as well as identifying props like the rode held by the spirit medium. They then discuss its significance in that ritual. They can also identify the instrument performed and discuss its function and efficacy. They can



identify the costumes worn by the participants and then discuss the significance of the colors as they relate to the religious aspects of ritualism. Certain colors carry a very important meaning in some of the African traditional functions. Costumes are not worn for the fun of it, but according to the symbolic spiritual meaning attached to the color. Just as an example the blue and white color of the lady's costumes symbolizes the rain spirits and black family spirits and red with white and black spots symbolizes hunting.

### **Ethnographic film as source of teaching content**

One of the challenges faced by music teachers as they attempt teach concepts of indigenous music is the ability to avail content that relate to issues concerning rituals. Ritual plays a very significant in any ethnic group's cosmology. According to Cox (1996:89):

A ritual is a repeated and symbolic dramatization that directs attention to a place where the sacred enters life thereby granting identity to participants in the drama, transforming them into a new state of being, communicating social meaning verbally and non-verbally, and offering a paradigm for how the world ought to be.

On the other hand Some(1993) posits that;

...ritual is, above all else, the yardstick by which people measure their state of connection with the hidden ancestral realm, with which the entire community is genetically connected.

It is equally important for teachers of music to make use of ethnographic film that portrays aspects of ritual as it relates to music in the society. In fact most of African traditional music is associated with ritualism in one way or another. From an ethnographic film a teacher can extract teaching content that can be useful in the teaching of musical concepts. The concepts range from song style, song text, contextual analysis, canto metric analysis, traditional instruments, organological issues, video documentation, reflexivity, ethnographic method, dance style, singing styles and participation and roles during performance. The students are also able to use their senses as they watch the film and this will arouse personal feelings and trigger a high level of imagination. Through this experience students will learn about African music's polyrhythmic that

it is rich in a network of rhythms that are intertwined. This structure is produced by percussive instruments such as drums, shakers and clappers. They also experience the polyphonic nature of African music. That is that African music may have several melodies sounding at the same time but with counterpoints. The combination of the two indicates how African music is complex and difficult to notate. These two attributes are very difficult to demonstrate in class unless shown from a performance and film can be the teacher's rescue. After watching the film the students realize how African music is diverse and dynamic. Sometimes one intends to discuss music of other cultures using a film as an aid. Students are able to learn the diversity of the music of that culture. Issues of dance, song, text, context, costumes, props, roles, gestures, instrumentation tend to be enshrined in one film. In other words the students are presented with the society in its entirety and this cannot be possible without a film.

From the songs in the film students may learn about the song style an example is one of the songs entitled *Sango ndodzungaira* in which the style is a lead and response style. This is a common style used in most of the African songs. In *Sango ndodzungaira*, the lead and response is as follows:

Lead: *Sango ndodzungaira* (I am loitering in the wilderness)

Response: *Nedondo* (In the forest)

From the song a teacher can make use of African method of learning music which is by rote. This approach is enshrined in the African philosophy of unhu/ubuntu which postulates that people learn as they interact by listening and imitating. That way learning is deliberate and engaging. Students learn music in context instead of learning music divorced from its functional state. Learning music divorced from context does not integrate student with life experiences. In the absence of the real practical demonstrations, music for life is taught better using ethnographic film. Music learned through this approach is more meaningful than abstracting teaching which is teacher centered, systematic and does not give room for the students to explore and experiences music in its function state. Merriam (1964) suggests several functions of music in the society which embrace aesthetic enjoyment, communication, particularly of emotion, symbolic representation, physical response, enforcement of conformity to social

norms, validation of social organizations, contributions to the stability and continuity of culture and contribution to the integration of society.

### **Ethnographic film as part of preservation and reconstruction of tradition**

One of the ultimate goals of ethnographic film is to document musical events and search for the reality, the actuality and man's relationship to his work, his environment and society (Edmonds 1974:15). Films are believed to do what writing may not. What is recorded speaks for itself. Life experiences are brought forth in front of the students. Apart from aiding teaching and learning, ethnographic films play a very significant role of preserving indigenous music for future reference by other scholars. Whatever is covered in the film is automatically archived and will last as long as the film is intact. Post-modernism has brought with it new perspectives of looking at things and new perspectives of how to look at the world. This has resulted in some musical cultures facing the danger of extinction. This may be as a result of the diffusion of different music cultures as well as the coming in of Christian beliefs which shun indigenous musical practices. It is the duty of ethnomusicologists and any other concerned parties to revive and preserve our musical heritage and one way of going about it is through film.

Film is one way of reconstructing the disjoined and disrupted society that has suffered terrible disintegration caused by exogenous cultures. Post-modernism considers preservation of indigenous music cultures as one of its main targets. This is in line with Davis (1992:361) who noted that, "When the products of thousand of years of musical evolution are considered in danger of extinction or of undergoing significant change...one response is conservation through documentation" When a musical event, a ritual or performance is documented through film, the film becomes a re-performance of the experiences during the actual performance. As students watch the film they watch the actors re-representing their performance in its entirety. In a way they also experience what the fieldworker (film maker) experienced. Such an approach serves a dual purpose of preserving

indigenous music together with indigenous knowledge system as well as acting as a source of teaching content.

### **Conclusion**

Construction of ethnographic films of this nature is vital in reconstructing the seemingly dimusicalized societies. The introduction of the western approaches to the teaching of music has to some extent benefited the African child, however the move has led to dimusicalization of the same student. Instead of balancing western and African approaches to the teaching of music and create space for the appreciation of promotion of indigenous music the system has over emphasized the western approach at the expense of the African. This leaves those teachers and lecturers who intend to teach African indigenous music with no sufficient content about African music. The use of ethnographic film serves the purpose of symbolic representation of the society's musical culture in its totality. It also generate a variety of teaching content ranging from songs, dance, organological issues, props, costume, traditional objects, text and context.

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