

Informal Learning of Indigenous Music and Dance Through Observation and Imitation: The Case of Bapedi Children's Musical Arts

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Abstract

In Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, Limpopo Province in South Africa, learning indigenous music and dance through observation and imitation seems to be a dominant and prominent practice of situational learning. Bapedi people tend to have their own distinctive music genres and purposes for their social events. Bapedi children's musical arts reveal much about Bapedi people and their way of life. This paper sets out to discuss the transmission process of indigenous music and dance through observation and imitation; and musico-artistic skills acquired by children with at least a partial degree of independence during social and cultural events. In the Bapedi culture, music is a natural phenomenon. Dance too, is not excluded. It is a significant aspect of Bapedi people's music tradition and a ubiquitous medium of communication or expression. Informal interviews, direct observations and video recordings were employed to collect data. The following research questions therefore guided this study: 1) How is social interaction in the Bapedi society viewed as a critical component of situational learning involving the transmission of children's musical arts? and 2) Do children in the Bapedi society have the ability to recognize and interpret what musical activity/event is taking place and to participate in ways sensitive to the context? The investigation has revealed that in the Bapedi culture, informal learning of indigenous music and dance; and social processes are indissolubly linked and take place within contexts in which members of the society relate to each other and their environment. The results of this study have further shown that the spectrum of learning experiences can range from accidental, unintentional, or reluctant forms of learning to active, intentional, involved, and highly valued forms of learning. It was concluded that in early childhood, it is play that underlies almost all informal learning and holism is a dominant principle in music and dance enculturation process of Bapedi children's musical arts.

Keywords: Indigenous music and dance, informal learning, Bapedi society, children’s musical arts, situational learning, Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe how social interaction in the Bapedi society is viewed as a critical component of situational learning involving the transmission of children’s musical arts, and to examine the musico-artistic skills acquired by children with at least a partial degree of independence. Bapedi people have enriched their culture that has wisdom in the local knowledge system to maintain their musical tradition, as well as children’s musical arts. They speak the language called Sepedi. It is one of the 11 official South African languages. Bapedi people have always managed to retain their cultural heritage. This society is not a primitive society or an isolated tribe, instead it is a society that has followed a modern lifestyle, but Bapedi people still maintain their customs and tradition, have a mind-set that is far ahead, because they are rich in philosophical teachings and values that sublime and obedient to the norms, socio-cultural values resulting from the decisions of their cultural heritage and identity. In Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, Limpopo Province (see Fig. 1), music making is closely related with and recognized as a social activity that reinforces and fosters social cohesion, communal music making and collaborative participation. Children learn by observing and listening to activities of adults and other children. This research study was conducted at Ga-Marodi village, Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, Limpopo Province in South Africa.



Figure 1: Geographical Location Map of South Africa showing Limpopo Province.

<https://www.geology.com/world/south-africa-satellite-image.shtml> [accessed 09 February2022].

Traditionally, in the Bapedi society, a child's early development has been perceived as a joint responsibility of the home, the school and the community (Lebaka 2017:151). Lebaka further remarks that the extended family system provides the child with multi-musical learning situations of expected roles, obligations and sanctions. Normally, the child is born of a family to the community (2017:151). During the months of pregnancy, the mother, while attending socio-musical occasions, the child begins to absorb the community's musical feeling. Some of the daily chores such as sweeping and pounding follow regular rhythmic pulsation. These gradually develop the child's pulse sense. My investigation has led me to conclude that whenever children's musical activities are going on in the homestead, a young baby carrier may participate while carrying the baby. The positive way to make the point is that as the baby carrier carries the baby and participates in the musical activities, the child being carried gradually absorbs the dance sensibility of the community. It is in fact, superfluous to argue that the first and probably the most foundational agency of traditional Bapedi Musical Arts education policy is the family – the extended family. Lebaka (2017:106) further believes that in indigenous Bapedi music education system, there is no point in the life cycle at which the creation of musical awareness could be said to be 'complete'. He is of the opinion that the content of any music training is specific at hand, that is, what is taught is how to behave musically in order to produce music sound acceptable to the members of the community (2017: 106). During my field research, I have observed that through music, children learn about themselves and retain, maintain and renegotiate their identities. Adults teach children about their musical heritage as a way in which to protect, support, perpetuate and preserve the Bapedi cultural heritage and identity. These observations are endorsed by Custodero et al (2003:560) who believe that all children are born with natural musical ability which vary from child to child. These scholars argue that rhyme, rhythm, song and movement have historically been used as a powerful teaching tools that have infused the values, mores and customs of cultures and societies. The above views are supported by New (1983:25), who observes that traditionally, Africans are exposed to music and movement from the time they are born. According to New, in early childhood, music is absorbed through the pores of the skin, and there is no formal teaching and no designated teacher (1983:25). In his view, before they walk, most children are carried on their backs, where they will continually hear working songs (1983:25). New further asserts that sometimes, it seems that music education starts even before birth, and there are songs to advise the expectant mother (1983:25). Corroborating the above views, Emberly and Davhula (2016:439) observe that children and young people often engage with musical arts' practices to inculcate and sustain their voices within a particular context, whether it is culture, community, place or space. Emberly and Davhula are of the opinion that as tradition is an evolving and changing construct, understanding where

and how children and young people learn music is important (2016:444). These scholars have discovered that in Vhavenda communities, in Limpopo Province in South Africa, young people utilize their learned musical skills as a means to create and voice cultural capital in a multicultural musical landscape (2016:450). They suggest that it is important to preserve our culture, and the most effective mode is through traditional music.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on the theory of knowledge as proposed by Bernstein Basil (2000), which views music as something profoundly experienced and embedded in social life (Carver 2017:130). Like in this study, indigenous music in the Bapedi culture is regarded as profoundly experiential and is embedded in the Bapedi people's cultural context in their daily social and cultural activities and in social life. Bernstein theory advocates for horizontal knowledge structure, whereby new knowledge is introduced in the form of a new "language" that does not depend on the previous concepts but has its own logic (Carver 2017:128). He regards 'horizontal discourse' as everyday knowledge. For him, horizontal discourse concerns every day or common knowledge, that is, the knowledge needed to perform tasks of everyday life (2000:157). Bernstein postulates that learned through modelling, horizontal discourse is likely to be oral, local, context dependent and specific, tacit, multi-layered and contradictory across but within contexts; the crucial feature is that it is segmentally organized (2000:159). He asserts that this segmental organization means that horizontal discourse is concerned with the immediate context, and what is known in one context cannot be transferred or applied in a different context (Carver 2017:127); and this is precisely what is happening in the Bapedi people's cultural context. Moreover, Bernstein observes that 'horizontal discourse' is directed towards acquiring a common competence rather than a graded performance (Carver 2017:127). Further, he elaborates that 'horizontal discourse' should lead to the type of music that all members of the community can perform and it becomes a context (Carver 2017:127). He points out that it is not simplicity or complexity that differentiates horizontal and vertical discourse, but the degree to which the discourse is systematically organized. Finally, Bernstein describes music as a member of the Humanities, and as having a horizontal knowledge structure.

Building on Bernstein's theory of knowledge structures, Maton Karl asserts that Bernstein's conceptualisation, while suggestive, is dichotomous and does not allow for the subtleties and variations within knowledge fields (Maton 2014:47). Maton concurs with Bernstein but suggests that he extends his theory to allow for more fine-tuned analyses and interpretations. The Bapedi people's cultural context is ideal for this model since, when the Bapedi children's musical arts are analysed and examined through the theoretical framework of this study, the 'horizontal discourse' focuses on new knowledge which is related to Bapedi people's daily activities and everyday life, as well as the transmission processes, context, structures and performance styles.

This theory is applicable to this study because in the Bapedi culture, there are musical types for children, for men, and for women. Where a musical type is meant or rather prescribed for men, women do not participate in its performance; neither do men participate in musical types for women. Children hardly participate in musical types for adults, nor do adults interfere in children's games and songs except when teaching them such songs. My interpretation of the model in relation to Bapedi people's cultural context is that in the Bapedi culture, music is learned in a local context and the horizontal discourse is concerned with the immediate context, and what is known in one context cannot be transferred or applied in a different context. The theory is adopted for this study because in the context of this study, Bapedi children's musical arts is a member of the community (Humanities), has a horizontal knowledge structure, and is oral, local, context dependent and specific.

This study is also based on an ethnographic approach as a proposed culturally embedded method aimed at contributing towards formulating a philosophy that informs content and curriculum. The study is enriched by Tedla's (1995:190) argument that the modern education system has much to learn from indigenous African education. In approximation to the present study, other scholars have employed an ethnographic approach. Included under this approach are Nettle (2005), Nzewi (2005) and Omolo-Ongati (2009:9). In particular, Omolo-Ongati (2009:9) has examined an ethnographic approach as a means of comprehending the context and facilitating the formation of a philosophy. Like in this study, her model proposes an ethnographic approach based on research into local music-making practices, beliefs, values, indigenous knowledge and education systems. Corroborating the above observations, Bruno Nettle, a major researcher and ethnomusicologist, states that 'For any culture, ethnomusicologists would wish to know about ways in which music is created, and is conceived as being created whether it is the result of inspiration, which musicians sometimes ascribe to influences of supernatural forces, or simply the result of hard, disciplined work (Nettle 2005:34). He argues that this is the central issue in the understanding of music and of music in culture. Endorsing Nettle's views, Nzewi (2005:1) observes that music in Africa is a philosophy of life; a transaction of meaning and processes of communal living ... a process of conducting relationships, coordinating systems, coping with the realities of human existence and probing the supernatural realm or forces. In the next section, I will discuss the research strategy for this study.

Research Strategy

The primary source for data collection was oral interviews. Secondary sources included observations, publications and records. Other methods included video recordings and photographing of different rehearsals and performances. This paper addresses the questions: 1) How is social interaction in the Bapedi society viewed as a critical component of situational learning involving the transmission of children's musical arts? and 2) Do children in the Bapedi society have the ability to recognize

and interpret what musical activity/event is taking place and to participate in ways sensitive to the context? Data for this study were collected for the most part in the field research of a social ethnomusicological carried out in Limpopo Province from the year 2003-2017. During this period, which entailed doing extensive fieldwork and a literature review, I became interested in music, culture and identity, as well as informal learning. When embarking on this study, I did not encounter challenges in the usage of Sepedi language as I am an insider, and write, read and speak the language fluently. Sincere thanks are due to the leader of Kgwahlana Kgutla Reed Pipes' Music ensemble and members of the ensemble for their time, patience, kindness and for sharing their insightful information about the music genre, informal learning process and the construction of musical instruments. With their permission and guidance, I developed a platform for investigating in-depth information and knowledge, that warranted ease of interrogating and eliciting interpretations and meanings of music, culture and identity, dance and dramatization. It became necessary for me to adopt the research stance of 'observer as participant'. Once the data were obtained, descriptive analysis of how social interaction within the Bapedi cultural context, which is viewed as a critical component of situational learning and analysis of musico-artistic skills acquired by children with at least a partial degree of independence were performed.

Research Findings and Discussion

The results of this study have shown that intent participation is a powerful form of fostering learning. It contributes to impressive learning such as that accomplished by young children. The results of this study have further shown that by attending traditional music festivals, children can unconsciously absorb the beauty of music and strive to reproduce that beauty, reflects beauty in his or her inner self and make evidence in sensitivity (**see photo 1**). This viewpoint is supported by Omolewa (2007: 596) who remarks that:

“traditional African education is usually generated within the communities, and is based on practical common sense, on teachings and experience and it is holistic, and cannot be compartmentalised and cannot be separated from the people who are involved in it because essentially, it is a way of life”

According to Omolewa, traditional education uses the age grade system in which those about the same age are brought together, and efforts are made to ensure that every person develops a set of skills.



Photo 1

In the Bapedi society, by attending music festivals, children can unconsciously absorb the beauty of music and strive to reproduce that beauty, reflect beauty in their inner self and make evidence in sensitivity, expression and attitude (Ga-Marodi village, Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, 20.10.2007), Photographer: Jukka Louhivuori.

With regard to the musico-artistic skills acquired by children with at least a partial degree of independence, the investigation has revealed that the simplest and most undifferentiated form of music learning occurs through imitation. During the study, it was established that from the earliest age, Bapedi children have every opportunity to imitate the songs and dances of adults, as most music is performed publicly and children generally follow their mothers everywhere until at least the age of ten (**see photo 2**). The above observations are in consonance with Sillitoe's (1998:227) assertion that indigenous knowledge often facilitates people's skilful management of their resources and people transfer much knowledge between generations by tradition learnt and communicated through practical experience, and are not familiar with trying to express everything they know in words. Sillitoe believes that the use of

indigenous knowledge and local participation require a full understanding of the local system (1998:246). Congruent to Sillitoe's belief, Nzewi (1999:76) postulates that during public music events a child has more liberty and scope for participation than adults. According to Nzewi, all through these stages, the child's capabilities are casually monitored (1999:76). Nzewi cautions that it is strongly encouraged to develop, no matter the quality of its efforts (1999:76). In his view, rhythm sense becomes strongly established. Nzewi emphasizes that a children's music group disciplines extroverts as much as it socializes introverts, and children's music making thus imbues balanced, sociable personality and teaches tolerance in early childhood (1999:76). Nzewi (1999:73) further advocates that African music education is largely an informal process, even in instances of musical families and music trades. He is of the opinion that informality does not imply lack of philosophy and systematic procedure in transmitting the knowledge of the music culture (1999:73). Nzewi confirms that in African traditions, opportunities for active participation in music making are abundant, and has observed that children are normally free to make music at all times during the day, in children's groups (1999:74). I very much agree with Nzewi's viewpoint. Communal music making in Africa is democratic. It is meant for the people, by the people and with the people. As such during enculturation process, the child never feels inhibited, nervous or discouraged by the fear of being condemned for making mistakes, but develops confidence through positive adult appreciation, and learns through being helped to feel or recognize and manage mistakes. Nompula (2011:371) shares more insight about the enculturation process of indigenous music with a focus on children musical arts. He observes that in the process of making indigenous music and dance, children are exposed to different African rhythms. According to him, the children are afforded the opportunity to learn these rhythms and how to internalise them. He maintains that exposure to cross-rhythms and syncopated rhythms helps develop children's creative skills. Nompula further opines that through participation in group-clapping, drumming, and music interpretation through dancing, the children's interpretative skills are developed. He is of the view that as the children are afforded an opportunity to express their musical feelings through dance, they learn rhythmic patterns by rote, memorise and internalise them (2011:372). Nompula suggests that children should be encouraged to participate in a variety of performances, not only to develop their confidence and self-esteem but also to improve their creative skills (2011:372). According to Nompula, spontaneity that prevails in the improvisation process builds children's self-confidence, and develops children's composition and co-operative skills. I applaud Nompula's suggestion for the children to be engaged in a variety of performances. This is necessary because by participating in a variety of performances, not only could the children's self-confidence and self-esteem be developed, but also their composition, creativity and cooperative skills. In agreement with Nompula, Civallero (2007:2) points out that oral tradition present in traditional as well as in urban, westernized contexts, is based on memory, words, sounds and improvisation. He believes that every culture represents an irreplaceable set of values and features,

and confirms that stories, knowledge and memory can also be passed down through music and chant (2007:2). In the same vein, Carlson (2011:77) affirms that both play and a game may be experienced together if one is voluntarily participating in an unnecessarily challenging activity for its own sake; but play can be understood as a way of doing something or the particular thing that is done. Carlson regards play as a kind of attitude in contrast to a type of activity (2011:77). He views games as fluid, alluring and durable access points into the play attitude, and believes that games induce play (2011:82).



Photo 2

In the Bapedi society, children are learning through keen observation and listening in anticipation of participation (Ga-Marodi village, Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, 20.10.2007), Photographer: Pekka Toivanen.

From the observations and interviews, it was established that in the lives of children in rural Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, creative musical spontaneity in the form of play songs or musical play contributes to the cultural landscape of childhood. Children acquire musical-artistic skill by participating appropriately in shaping contexts in which processes of music-making occur and musical knowledge is generated. Attesting to the observations above, Harwood (1998:54) writes that

children learn a great deal from one another whenever and wherever they interact, especially in carefree environments such as the playground. Endorsing Harwood's viewpoint, Mapaya (2011:68) postulates that this is attributed to the fact that children, knowing no boundaries, will follow their friends from one environment to the next regardless of their cultural background. Mapaya elaborates by stating that the free movement is without prejudice and it affords the child a wider childhood experience – musical experience included (2011:68). In his view, much learning takes place in these kinds of situations (2011:68). According to Mapaya, the learning process here involves the child consciously noting items of interest as it follows what is happening in the differing environments as presented by its peers (2011:69). Mapaya further asserts that to enhance the internalisation process, children often act out their observations later, and the impact of these learning phases on children's makeup is tremendous (2011:69). He is convinced that learning at this level has proved to be effective because there are no prejudices or judgemental tendencies involved. It is a give and take situation where a child and his or her peers play interchangeable roles of both the teacher and the learner throughout the playing session (2011:69). Attesting to the above views, Karolina and Jutta (2010:6) write that what is referred to as indigenous knowledge may contain a wide array of ideas and practices. According to Karolina and Jutta, when dealing with indigenous knowledge, the importance of its social and cultural context is emphasized (2010:8). These scholars believe that indigenous knowledge has become part of development discourse, as a means to involve local communities and make development more participatory (2010:10). In their view, extracting knowledge from local contexts is a subtle way of exercising control (2010:11). Corroborating the above observations, Adams and van de Vijver (2017:116) remark that the relationships are important for how individuals define themselves as these provide them with the respective roles that give a sense of meaning to their lives. Furthermore, Adams and van de Vijver remind us that identity is important for psychosocial functioning (i.e. psychological well-being and socio-cultural adjustment), (2017:116).

Conclusion

When the results were examined, it was understood that the learning process is a group activity; it is both a pleasure and a recreation rather than a core. Closer investigation has also revealed that after acquiring the skill, children transfer the experience they have gained from musical involvement in adult groups, drawing their members from those of the lineage or children living in the same homestead. The findings have also revealed that the spectrum of learning experiences can range from accidental, unintentional, or reluctant forms of learning, to active, intentional, involved, and highly valued forms of learning. Attesting to the above views, New (1983:25) opines that African music exists in a bewildering variety of different forms; even within one tribe there may be considerable variation. New writes that children are encouraged to behave like good members of the community through song (1983:25).

The results yielded thus far, have revealed that children and young people often engage with musical arts' practices to inculcate and sustain their voices within a particular context, whether it is culture, community, place or space. It was also established that from the earliest age, Bapedi children have every opportunity to imitate the songs and dances of adults, as most music is performed publicly and children generally follow their mothers everywhere until at least the age of ten. During the study, it was also observed that by attending music festivals, children can unconsciously absorb the beauty of music and strive to reproduce that beauty, reflect beauty in their inner self and make evidence in sensitivity, expression, and attitude. Based on these findings and discussions, it is arguable that children transfer the experience they have gained from musical involvement in adult groups to their own practice. As active agents, they avail themselves, contributing to the creation of Bapedi children musical Arts that are both individualistic and communal. Regarding acculturation, McGloin et al. (2009:9) state that in the process of dispossession, many knowledge systems have been lost alongside countless languages and the capacity to articulate cultural ways of knowing. These scholars are concerned that indigenous ways of knowing have been marginalised worldwide (2009:9). According to them, this has been integral to the project of colonisation (2009:9). The only solution to the problem according to them, is: "in order to conquer and subdue, a process of subordination is necessary and the outlawing of culture is an effective way of subjugating cultural knowledges". In a similar note, Kaya and Seleti (2013:33) recommend that African intellectuals should help Africa close the gap created by over four hundred years of domination and marginalisation of African people's knowledge systems, by rejecting the utilisation of dominant western world view of knowing and knowledge production as the only way of knowing. Whereas these scholars acknowledge that there is no single approach to Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) research, they put emphasis on participatory approaches and methods which incorporate the knowledge and opinions of local people in the planning and management of research activities in their own settings.

Indications from the investigation suggest that the future of the current generation, especially the youth, depends on the knowledge and understanding they acquire from the past, and the wisdom of the past can be built and transferred to suit the present, which can then lead them into a prosperous future. Since the Indigenous Local Knowledge of the Bapedi people is so rich in significance, it could, if it is kept alive, lead to exciting creative possibilities in the present and the future. It is recommended that a research study of this kind should be taken seriously in South Africa for an exploration of indigenous values influencing learning systems. Targeting Creative Arts, Anthropology, History and Ethnomusicology educators/lecturers would also be an important part in an effort to include Indigenous Knowledge and ways of knowing and thinking in the curriculum of both lower and higher education. Based on these findings and discussions, it is arguable that cultural and religious practices of the Bapedi people should not be dismissed at face value as practices

overtaken by circumstances and hence irrelevant to the present African community developments needs. The results yielded thus far suggest that Bapedi people should keep and perpetuate their valuable heritage, which is still needed for survival and for the welfare of our next generation.

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