

MINETTE MANS

5. PLAYING THE MUSIC – COMPARING PERFORMANCE OF CHILDREN'S SONG AND DANCE IN TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY NAMIBIAN EDUCATION

How do young Namibian children engage with music? What and when do they play? How are they educated in the performing arts? These are fascinating questions upon which I hope to provide a perspective. By way of introduction, let me explain a few very general principles on which informal, community-based arts education tends to be based in Namibia. I follow this with a look at the principles on which arts education in schools are based, focusing on music and dance. The term music must be understood in an African framework where dance and music are usually holistically integrated and often inclusive of costume, ritual, stories framed within a particular cosmology. Performance is thus “a web of meaning to be read from its surrounding context” (Erlmann, 1996, p. 66). I will be using the terms music, dance and play interchangeably, depending on which aspect is in most sharply focus.

Namibia is an extensive but lightly populated country in south-western Africa. Apart from one city, and sixteen towns of reasonable size, most of the country consists of semi-arid agricultural land thinly dotted with villages. About two-thirds of the population¹ live in the semi-rural and rural areas where the development infrastructure of roads, electricity and communications systems are gradually being implemented. Hence a large proportion of the population does not have day-to-day access to newspapers or television, and entertainment is self-constructed and performed mostly in communal settings. Ironically, the poverty and lack of development of the past has contributed to robust cultural practices, and performances that have long since been discontinued in urban areas retain their vitality in many rural areas.

An interesting characteristic of Namibian cultures is that a major portion of all musical performance amongst different cultural groups is called play² not only for children but also for adults. Of course, play is central to our understanding of young children, but we often forget how much of their play is musical play, in which rhythm, movement, characterization, drama or pantomime, and imagination are combined. Play

¹ The population totals about 1.5 million, spread over about 825,000 square kilometres.

² For example *dhana* means to play, and *uudhano* (*oudano*) is the form of song-dance-play. */Hurub* means play, and *#ab /hurub* is play with reed-pipes and dance. Similarly children play *omukwenga*, *outetera*, *onyando*, *ondjongo*, and others. Play is more fully discussed in a paper presented at a conference of the Nordiska Afrikainstitutet in Turku, Finland in October 2000 (in press) entitled “Unlocking Play in Namibian Musical Identity”.

usually involves the group collectively singing and clapping while others (ones, twos, or more) take turns at dancing individual variations to fixed rhythmic patterns in the centre of the circle or space. Play often centres around taking turns or surprising another by “giving” a touch, like “tag”. Much children’s play is a preparation for adult play. Although the notion of play is often relegated to the status of “mere recreation”, it is an important facet of communal education, and in the Namibian context it also embodies value systems. It is not mere frivolity but, as Peter Brook (1968) says, play is hard work! Hence “[p]lay is a reflexive activity, and, as most everyone would agree, what is communicated through play, while defined as amusement, can be quite serious indeed” (Arnoldi, 1995, p. 22). Through play, young children are educated not only in a specific music–dance, but in the moral values, conditions of existence, and social relationships of their societies with all their ambiguities and inconsistencies. Music and play can be described as aspects of education for socialization.

Socialization Through Music

Songs illustrate social structures and values through references to kinship and family structure, world views, the importance given to marriage and lineage systems, religious systems, value systems, and production systems. Song not only provides a channel for the transmission of societal values and histories, but is in and of itself a way of knowing and reflecting on self and society. Blacking (1985) states that, “music is an important way of knowing, and the performing arts are important means of reflection, of sensing order and ordering experience, and relating inner sensations to the life of feeling of one’s society” (p. 65). Chernoff (1979) underlines this approach by writing that “music’s explicit purpose, in the various ways it might be defined by Africans, is, essentially, socialization.” Apart from being used as a *means* of socializing young persons, music and dance have long provided the *context* within which socializing education could take place. Philosophical and moral systems of the society are built into the music and dance—making itself. They link with the philosophical and moral systems that lie at the root of social structures, and are seen as a metaphor of life (Dagan, 1997). So much experience and knowledge is implicit in performance. For example, I recently recorded a chantefable called “Nauwa” that surprised me by its extreme brevity. Upon enquiry as to the meaning of the text³ I was told that a long story preceded the actual chantefable, involving kidnapping of a girl (Nauwa) for marriage by monsters or cannibals, her escape with the help of her mother-in-law-to-be, the chase, and so on. It is only the culmination of the story, where the monster stubs his toe on the stone and cries out against Nauwa that is actually told and sung. The child must know this background story before understanding and participating in the chantefable.

Unlike city living, life in those rural communities without access to television or radio involves musical performances on numerous occasions – “at the drop of a hat” as I was told. These occasions quite naturally include celebrations, weddings, birth and funeral ceremonies, work, change of life stages, seasons, inaugurations, healings and so on. In the past, more than the present, the celebration and ritualization of the cycles of

³ The text basically states a man stubbed his toe on a stone and cursed the girl Nauwa for causing his pain.

life informed and prepared the younger generation in terms of social expectations regarding adult life, kinship and community ethos. Even when young children are not directly involved in performances they are included on the fringes from where they observe and learn.

How does that learning happen? Partly through enculturation or immersion in cultural practices and partly through direct oral/aural instruction. Historically, Namibian cultures have, by and large, been oral cultures.⁴ We know that education forms part of all cultures, whether it occurs via the written word or orally. In fact, both African and Western writers today challenge the colonial concept that an oral culture is inferior to one based on a written form (cf. Arom, 1991; Chernoff, 1979; Coplan, 1991; Kubik, 1974, 1986, 1987, 1989; Mazrui, 1990; Okpewho, 1983; Tay, 1989; Vail & White, 1991; and others). Hence, educational practices in Namibian societies prior to government schools included initiation "schools", apprenticeship, "child-to-child" and peer education through which a wealth of specialized life-related knowledge was imparted to the new generation. In these societies teaching or instruction was mainly oral/aural and music, dance, stories, narratives, games and ritual were therefore major means through which knowledge, life skills and social values were transmitted. Nowadays this is not so common, but similar events still take place. An example: in the northern Kunene Region small Ovazemba boys between the ages of four through ten often still attend the circumcision school, *etanda*, usually during a school vacation period. In this time they are circumcised, and while waiting for healing they are instructed about their responsibilities, roles and expected future behavior. They form a named age group with life-long bonds and undergo tests. Even though their mothers may come to care for them, they learn to hunt, to sing special *onyando* songs, create musical instruments and make special palm frond skirts to wear for the dance. *Onyando* songs are performed during the final procession home and the whole community joins in. These songs are some of the most beautiful I have come across in my research! Their educational purpose is considered very valuable in the community, alongside formal schooling which cannot replace these valuable life lessons.

It is common knowledge that children in African societies are likely to be introduced to music and dance at an early age through routine exposure, being integrated into almost all social events,⁵ whether they are carried on their mothers' backs, clinging to their skirts, or moving within their own peer group. Damara children on our ranch often break into exuberant choral song even when struggling to carry water to fire fighters in the extreme heat or fetching wood. Children's integration into performance is not mere happenstance. The importance of being drawn into performance becomes clear with the insight that it forms a vital link in the socialization process – a process of Africanization. In many Namibian communities children are considered symbols of the inner strength and "wealth" of a family. They are welcomed

⁴ This statement does not negate the fact that schooling and literacy in Namibia and all over Africa are steadily on the increase, and so is the publication of written literature as well as academic texts.

⁵ I have observed a healing in Katima Mulilo (1994) where the healer's singers were young girls – the leader appeared to be about twelve years old. They were expected to continue their singing throughout the night until the divining (*liyala*) was completed. Considering the crucial role of the singers to the success of the event, this was no light responsibility.

as future helpers and they bring the possibility of future marital ties and kinship extensions through which familial wealth may increase. Hence, songs and dance illustrating and teaching about future economic tasks are common practice.⁶ The responsibilities of cattle and goat herding are usually the task of small boys and youths. Baby care, cleaning and cooking remains the task of girls. Thus one finds songs which prepare and inform, one example being the songs sung at an Aawambo boy's name-giving ceremony (*epiitho*) to remind those gathered of the boy's future herding task. Ovahimba children may not play their musical games inside the home compound, only adults may. During the day children have chores to perform, but at night all the children may go outside to a clearing, play *omukwenga* or *ondjongo* and sing about cattle and dance until late at night. Kxoe, !Kung and Ju/'hoan people have many songs and dances that teach about the character and habits of animals and birds – important knowledge for a future hunter. Among Ju/'hoansi there are special songs following the hunt, indicating whether it was a “good” killing or not.⁷ In this event the community is informed and instructed in terms of the inherent meaning of the hunt and ethical standards are reinforced. Even when these songs are not performed by children, they listen, observe and learn through enculturation.

This brings me to ask how children feature in community performances? Ottenburg (1997) suggests that there are at least three categories of children's dance in most African societies. These are:

[T]hose that are unique to children, passed down from generation to generation but not danced by adults. A second occurs when children on their own imitate adult dances and dancers if permitted to do so, and the third is found when adults organize children to perform specific dances, as at initiations and other events governed by adults. (p. 12)

The *onyando* mentioned above is an example of the latter category, while *omukwenga* and others might be examples of the second. However, although Ottenburg does not refer to performances created by children for children, it is my experience that, apart from the above, several such categories exist in Namibia. For example, most forms of *oudano*, *omukwenga*, *ondjongo* that I have observed have been created by children and taught peer-to-peer. When children start attending school they share songs from different cultures and adapt and transform their own as a result. Further, small children play an observing role at communal (mostly adult) play or events. They may move to the rear of the play circle or enter and imitate the dances of their elders. Their initial attempts at participation are generally treated supportively by peers and elders. For example I've observed a small girl of about two years follow her mother (a good dancer) into the circle, trying to catch her skirt as she swirls and stamps. Onlookers encouraged the toddler with shouting and friendly laughter, and swung her out of harm's way only when the dancers were likely to knock her over.

⁶ In fact, children in many areas are expected to work very hard and wait until last before receiving food. Often from the age of about ten years they do not sleep inside the house or compound, but in a room or hut just outside.

⁷ E. Olivier, personal communications, Windhoek, 1996.



(Above) A SMALL GIRL IN AN ADULT PERFORMANCE OF *UUDHANO* (captured from digital video by M. Mans, 1999)

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