

BOOK REVIEW

Music Education in Africa: Concept, Process, and Practice.

Akuno, Emily Achieng'. Editor. 2019.

Abingdon: Routledge. Bibliographies, 93 illustrations, 335pp.

Scholarly debate on music education on the African continent is largely confined to journal articles and post graduate theses. A publication such as this volume of essays, edited by Emily Achieng' Akuno has the potential to distil the various ideas and approaches into a potent "brew" and weave the different threads from across the continent to reveal its inherent patterns. Such a volume would constitute a landmark in the field. However, this collection of essays disappoints on different levels.

The title suggests a volume with both a theoretical and practical perspective on music education in Africa. While both are present, the book's lack of internal organisation means that the words of its subtitle, "concept, process, and practice" are never defined or satisfactorily explored. In fact, by the end of the volume, this reader was still not sure what each meant, and whether they were the same or different from one other. This is a pity, as the field is crying out for cogent, consistent scholarship in both theory and practice.

Twenty-two authors contribute to the volume's nineteen chapters. While the continental scope suggested by the title would be an ambitious goal for any single publication, the majority of the authors are from Kenya (9) and Uganda (3). This means that the "rest" of Africa is sparsely represented as in Nigeria (4), Ghana (1), Zimbabwe (1), Zambia (1) and South Africa (2). There is one contribution each from francophone Africa (Senegal) and North Africa (Egypt). With no clear organisation of chapters to reflect on commonality or difference between regions, a strong editorial thread drawing connections between chapters would have been helpful, but this is not evident.

The chapters cover a range of topics. Some are more philosophical while others are oriented toward practical lesson plans. Many discuss how to transfer specific practices to the formal space of the classroom. For instance, three chapters deal with the use of children's songs and games in classrooms. Others are focused on regional accounts, in, for instance, the use of the Zambian xylophone, *silimba*, to teach music concepts, or a community music type intervention in Egypt. There are chapters that deal with more contemporary issues, for example, art composition and the use of technology, and so on. As well as different curricular areas, the chapters address different contexts, primary, secondary and tertiary, formal and non-formal education. The variety of topics addressed in the book is admirable, but

the diversity reflects a broad field where, as yet, there is little alignment in terms of curricular design. Part of the reason this publication disappoints is because it provides no conceptual direction for this smorgasbord of options.

One early chapter stands out from the rest in that it tackles important questions head on. Otchere's chapter problematises many of the underlying assumptions of the field that are unacknowledged by the majority of his fellow contributors. He writes:

Yes, it is totally important to prioritise the study of African music (with all that is entailed in it) in African institutions of learning, but will that necessarily make the music curriculum relevant to students of Africa? Will that make significant strides in the incessant tug to justify the very existence of music programmes in schools? Are music educators in Africa seeking answers to the real problems? (59-60)

Otchere identifies several problems, for example, he argues that "obsolete" African practices may be as irrelevant to students as Western art music, and he questions their inclusion in the curriculum. He notes the predominance of popular music, asserting that it has "gradually emerged as the musical mother-tongue in Africa, in the sense of being the music that is most accessible to the growing child in the environment" (64). He asks why popular music is so underrepresented in education and related scholarly debates.

With the exception of Jean Kidula's chapter, Otchere's critical approach is unmatched in the book, and his questions go unanswered by the writers who adhere to a romanticised view of African musicking. They evoke an idealised world with unquestioned statements such as: "[a]n African learner develops in an interactional environment and even from pre-birth is already part of his/her surroundings" (Human 102), and Nzewi's assertion that:

The ideal musical arts practitioner, as much as educator, operated as the facilitator of virtuous living. Specialist musical arts researchers and practitioners in traditional African societies, individuals who applied the musical arts as field and tool of engagement with societal issues, had the sacrosanct role and mandate to expose, censure and discipline fiendish minds and actions that violated virtuous living (77).

These statements reveal concepts not overtly elaborated in Akuno's introductory and closing sections, and ambiguously related to the book's title. They lurk between the lines and have become so normalised in this literature that they are barely noticeable. I argue, however, that they contribute to the very problem they aim to solve, an untransformed music curriculum.

The first is the use of the term “musical arts.” This term is defined in the introduction and enlisted by many of the authors. In Akuno’s definition, it demonstrates the marriage of the expressive art forms in performances that express culturally significant moments. Incorporating sound (vocal and otherwise), text (verbal and non-verbal), costume (including masks), décor, body movement, drama and related theatrical displays and material artefacts (including music instruments), this cultural expression cannot be simply called music because of its multidimensional nature” (1).

The use of this term in scholarly work can be traced back to the Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education (PASMAE) conference in 2001 and it has become widely used. What is missing from the literature, including this volume, is how these arts (other than music) may be meaningfully incorporated in a curriculum. Certainly, none of the chapters in this book addresses this question in a substantive way. This is problematic because the “musical arts” as a concept is given much prominence, but on questions regarding how they are incorporated into pedagogy, how they support each other, what constitutes progression, or how they are to be assessed, the literature is silent. The volume does not offer a significant shift away from this over simplified approach.

This is problematic because the term itself is reified. Implied in the term “musical arts” is a body of practice that is “original” where original is an idealised state of Africa, untouched by outside influence. Agawu refers to this as a “nostalgia for a lost, if little-known African past ... a magnificent era now permanently inaccessible, an era to be desired, invented, and reinvented as often as is necessary” (2003: 22). Two problems can be identified in the notion of “original” knowledge and its impact on formal music education. First, the depiction of the “musical arts” as unchanging does not take into account the changes and fusions that have taken place over centuries, from within or outside Africa, nor the contemporary expressions of these. This romanticism for a time more ideal cannot serve the present. Second, an idealised view of oral practice does not distinguish between the everyday, common knowledge shared by all members of a community, and specialist knowledge that is one of the end goals of education. Recognising the different kinds of knowledge, or levels of specialisation in different practices does not devalue African music. However, if it is to be successfully implemented in a curriculum, such differentiation must be made. At primary school, participation, cultural enrichment and learning the moral expectations of the community might be appropriate. But if these are not extended to formulate coherent progression, knowledge might remain confined to the context with limited potential to take students beyond it.

The important question is, what is “musical arts” education for? If it is cultural education, it will always be side-lined by Western Art Music, with its significant canon, developed pedagogies, and theoretical grammar. The values of African music, as asserted by many of the authors in this volume, are different to those of Western music, but if the recontextualisation of African music is to afford a comparative “curriculum”, then it must be a more structured, ordered curriculum, where the relationships between concept, process, and practice are made explicit.

The question is not so much how to use children’s songs and games in the classroom, but how these fit into something larger, a broader progressive picture of a curriculum, that goes beyond teaching social rules of behaviour and leads toward a conceptual grasp that affords critical thinking.

Lucia’s (2002) review of the first “musical arts” themed publication (Herbst, Nzewi, and Agawu 2003) identifies the same problems evident in Akuno’s new volume, that is, an oversimplification of the problems, the essentialising binaries, and the lack of criticality. Considering almost two decades have passed between that publication and this one, it is depressing to note that not much progress has been made in pushing the debates forward. The chapters hint at what might be happening “on the ground” but these interventions can only be piecemeal until the theoretical work is done to establish a way forward for “music education in Africa.” What is required is a philosophy that goes beyond essentialising tropes, un-problematized statements, and “feel[ing] the Africanness of respect for and cooperation with others that are all embodied in the musical arts” (Akuno 331). In Kidula’s words, “Clearly, we have work to do” (Kidula 25).

References

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