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Community Dancing and Dance-Musicking

A Communitarian Cultural Regenerative System of Knowing, and Knowledge Activation

For generations, dance and music traditions have continuously proliferated from people's ways of life, human natural and prevailing environments, and from community life interactions and co/existences. While it is well established that the arts complement each other, in formal educational contexts, they have often been researched, assessed, and interpreted in isolation – meaning that only bits and pieces of a given phenomenon are explored. Sometimes these isolated pieces are made to represent “the whole”, which hinders full regeneration¹ of the knowledge therein. In this paper, I bring to the fore the need to focus more on arts processes in both formal and non-formal dance and dance-music knowledge production systems, or contexts that allow for full cultural regeneration relevant for arts education and arts education research.

As part of my early upbringing, we learnt musicking, dancing, dance-musicking², as well as their related craftsmanship (making percussive and melodic instruments) through an experiential learning/teaching process. In this process, imitative bodily, sound and inner perception of dance, music, dance-music manifests in the communal process of mirroring and “doing” (Mabingo et al., 2020). As I reflect on these processes today, I understand that to harness the full extent of a communally inscribed, coded, and encoded dance and music phenomenon, an interdisciplinary orientation, and wholistic approach is key. An orientation that considers community frames around the practical unfolding of such phenomena creates a clearer and succinct distinction between their perception, and their actual practical enaction (Hall, 1983).

1 In this article, I use the term ‘regeneration’ in its particular relation to a communitarian system of transfer of the cultural knowledge imbedded in the dance, music, and dance-music traditions. This term is used in the context of wholistic (or partial) enaction and activation of such knowledge.

2 This concept refers to the free and non-prescriptive engagement with the music for dancing before and during the dancing. By the use of this concept, I further refer to the “process” of making music through the enaction of dance movements (Kibirige, 2020).

Similarly, to fully activate such knowledge-laden phenomena, one needs to adopt “community compliant” pedagogical approaches for teaching, researching, assessing, accessing, and interpreting this knowledge (Kurath, 1957; Ungvary, Waters, & Rajka, 1992; Hamilton, 2019). One needs to look into the invisible and silent aspects of such a phenomenon that are just felt in moments or processes of doing, for there is more to it than what meets the performer-audience (performative) eye/contextualization. In her article *African Dance: The Continuity of Change* (1973), Judith Lynn Hanna argues that: “Until recently African dance was rarely art for its own sake. Rather it was utilitarian – ‘arts’ for life’s sake. African dance is cultural behaviour, determined by the values, attitudes, and beliefs of a people, each group having its own aesthetic criteria” (1973, p. 166). Hanna’s argument here highlights the communal sense of inclusiveness as an intention that is part of communal life, but also highlights the principles of appropriation in the artistic production processes, which at times take the arts ‘for art’s sake’. The view of ‘arts for life’s sake’ incorporates a form of continuity, self-regeneration, and validity from the past to the present, and transcends formalistic mechanical separations that often hinder their wholistic understanding in research, practice and arts education. This is what Norwegian ethnochoreologist Egil Bakka alludes to when he argues that; “[...] to perform folk dances as an integral part of contemporary life enables a continuity with the past which is both desirable and legitimate” (Bakka, 1999, p. 80).

A wholistic communitarian³ system of cultural regeneration is dependent on a continuous web of communal interconnections, in which human coexistences thrive. In this system, knowing and knowledge transfer are intertwined. The crucial questions here then are: How does the isolation develop, and how do practitioners, in this process of activation of knowledge, counteract such formalistic isolation of these arts, and the knowledge imbedded in them? As widely known, community traditions in sub-Saharan Africa and many other places in the world are functional, and are regarded as *knowledge bodies* (Kibirige, 2020). This knowledge, that is activated through living in the bodily and sonic action, reaction, and interaction, is comprehensively embedded in both sound and movement actions combined. Without this combination, merger, intertwining, as well as interdisciplinary complementarity, this knowledge and knowing are practically incomplete – meaning that only parts of this knowledge are activated.

Among the Acholi people of Northern Uganda, the *Lamokowang* dancing, musicking, and dance-musicking tradition is conceived from interactively converging many ongoing bodily and sonic aspects in the moment of enaction. The tradition is communally conceptualised in the combination of material and non-material aspects cre-

³ This is an approach in which community is a web of interconnections (human, material, and non-material) for individuals’ and communities’ social-cultural being, and cultural regeneration (Kibirige, 2020).

ating a myriad of relationships and alliances that articulate the very crux of these processes (Kibirige, 2020; Kuwor, 2017; Nketia, 1974; Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2015). It is from these complex interactive bodily motions and gesticulations, the unconscious rhythmic multiplications of movement and dance-melodic patterns that practitioners' relationships and the entire knowledge base therein are developed and maintained. In an ultimate *Lamokowang* enactment, and in the continuous process of the bodily and body-sonic dialogue, inner and outer negotiations, comes a 'peak moment' in the dancing and dance-musicking that the practitioner experiences. This moment, in which the practitioner 'loses him/her' self into the flow of the enactment, is verbally expressed by practitioners as *Kuc-madwong*. The repetitions, polykinetics, polyrhythmic and other aspects that formulate and maintain the artistic dialogues in place and time, converge to foment and maintain this peak moment. It is a strong absorption into the flow of the dancing, where all that precedes it is but a form of propelling internal (inner-felt) or external force. Some practitioners mention that in this moment, they tend to feel 'at ease and at peace'. To describe this moment, Wendy Akello, a *Lamokowang* practitioner, puts it in a statement that: "*Cawa ame dano pe ngeyo kome*" – translated as "a time when one loses himself in a moment" (personal communication, April 24, 2018). Constantine Odida Ojegele, another *Lamokowang* practitioner, describes it as "*Bedo calo gin mo keken marac peke i lobo ni*" – which translates as "being or living in a moment like there isn't anything at all wrong in the world" (personal communication, December 14, 2017). This is closely related to the concept of flow described in psychology as an understanding of experiences during which individuals are fully involved in a current moment (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). To fully achieve this moment, one has to be in sync with the entire dance, music, and dance-music phenomenon with all that is allied to it in that moment. Isolation of these components for academic or performance purposes should therefore be made with absolute awareness of its consequences, limitations, and (or) possibilities. Within multi-ethnic nations, when dance and music traditions cross regional and tribal borders for performative purposes, a diverse space for cultural expression, relevance, growth, and regeneration is created (Desmond, 1993). The challenge in such situations has always been how to ensure that local cultural norms and values of the bearers, and their communal knowledge that is said to exist in such dance traditions are respected, but also given space to self-regenerate rather than being suffocated. This is enshrined in the 2003 *UNESCO convention*, where in article 2:1, respect for cultural diversity and human creativity, mutual respect among communities, as well as their participation is placed high on the agenda. As such, many local communities continue to hold on to a communitarian model of inclusive learning. This has been at the core of many African indigenous pedagogies for a long time. Etienne Wenger (1998) attests to this model when he conceptualizes learning to unfold not only in the head, but also in the relationships between the learner and his social world, and therefore both the social and

the individual combined constituting each other. Wenger, therefore, views learning as part of social structure, where community socialization is key.

Indeed, communal knowledge activation processes such as dancing and dance-musicking are culturally specific, as focus is on communal and national values of such a community. However, as Lloyd Fallers (1961) questions, “how can one encourage a Ugandan sense of self-esteem without encouraging tribalism?” (1961, p. 678) In the same vein I ask: how can local communities maintain ‘artistic nationalism’ and modernity without necessarily compromising their cultural knowledge, norms, and values enshrined in their art forms? One way to address these questions, I argue, is through promoting ‘informed’ activation of the present (artistic) knowledge and giving community traditions the space, they need to self-regenerate guided by the current environments. This calls for productive and equitable complementarity between the formal and the non-formal knowledge bases.

The founding of the *International Journal for Research, Cultural, Aesthetic, and Arts Education*, with all its value and objectives, has come at the right time of revolutionary arts education when different knowledge bases (formal and non-formal) need to be equitably leveraged for inclusive, accessible, and equitable education for the current world population.

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