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‘At the sources of the Nile’: creative writing as a tool to work on student’s colonial views

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"At the sources of the Nile": creative writing as a tool to work on student's colonial views

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Abstract: This article describes the experiences with an ethnomusicological teaching method from the field of performative ethnography in Germany. In a creative writing process students are asked to develop a fictional ethnography of a people group 'at the sources of the Nile'. Based on the corpus class room discussions are carried out to deconstruct the students' 'image of Africa' and to thematise postcolonial theories. The author describes the project design and gives an evaluation of the outcomes of four applications of the project at different German institutions for higher education. It shows that the students have consistent stereotypes of African cultures and its musics that are mainly generated by the German media and international movies. Feedback of the students and critical reflections lead to the question how it is possible to discuss colonial stereotypes and racist world views in ethnomusicological teachings without reproducing it at the same time.

Keywords: Postcolonial studies. Ethnomusicological teaching method. Performative ethnography. Image of Africa. Creative writing.

"Nas fontes do Nilo": a escrita criativa como ferramenta para trabalhar nas visões coloniais dos estudantes

Resumo: Este artigo descreve as experiências com um método de ensino etnomusicológico no campo da etnografia performativa na Alemanha. Em um processo de escrita criativa, os alunos são convidados a desenvolver uma etnografia fictícia de um grupo de pessoas "nas origens do Nilo". Com base nos textos, as discussões são realizadas em sala de aula para desconstruir a "imagem da África" dos alunos e tematizar as teorias pós-coloniais. O autor descreve o desenho do projeto e avalia os resultados de quatro aplicações do projeto em diferentes instituições alemãs para o ensino superior. Isso mostra que os estudantes têm estereótipos consistentes de culturas africanas e suas músicas que são geradas principalmente pela mídia alemã e filmes internacionais. O feedback dos estudantes e as reflexões críticas levam à questão de como é possível discutir os estereótipos coloniais e as visões de um mundo racista nos ensinamentos etnomusicológicos sem, ao mesmo tempo, reproduzi-los.

Palavras-chave: Estudos pós-coloniais. Método de ensino etnomusicológico. Etnografia performativa. Imagem africana. Escrita criativa.

"En las fuentes del Nilo": la escritura creativa como una herramienta para trabajar en las opiniones coloniales de los estudiantes

Resumen: Este artículo describe las experiencias con un método de enseñanza etnomusicológica en el campo de la etnografía performativa en Alemania. En un proceso de escritura creativa, se les pide a los estudiantes que desarrollen una etnografía ficticia de un grupo de personas "en las fuentes del Nilo". Sobre la base del corpus, se llevan a cabo discusiones en la sala de clases para deconstruir la "imagen de África" de los estudiantes y para tematizar las teorías poscoloniales. El autor describe el diseño del proyecto y evalúa los resultados de cuatro aplicaciones del proyecto en diferentes instituciones alemanas para la educación superior. Muestra que los estudiantes tienen estereotipos consistentes de las culturas africanas y sus músicas que son generadas principalmente por los medios alemanes y las películas internacionales. La retroalimentación de los estudiantes y las reflexiones críticas llevan a la pregunta de cómo es posible discutir los estereotipos coloniales y las visiones de un mundo racistas en las enseñanzas etnomusicológicas sin reproducirlas al mismo tiempo.

Palabras-clave: Estudios poscoloniales. Método de enseñanza etnomusicológica. Etnografía performativa. Imagen de África. Escritura creativa.

Introduction

When teaching postcolonial theories and African music at German universities, I regularly face a peculiar challenge: students easily understand and can even transfer the concepts to various musical examples, yet they refuse to reflect on their own colonial and racist views and regard them as the problem of 'others'. This challenge arises partly as Germany's colonial period ended after the First World War and is rarely discussed today. Public culture memory culture is dominated by the Holocaust and invasions during the Second World War, so few German students know of the genocide in Namibia and the colonial wars in East Africa. Neither are postcolonial politics in Africa taught in German schools. Apart from tourist sites in Northern Africa and South Africa, where some German students have travelled, Africa is completely *terra incognita*. Few students have any contact with Africans from the relatively small migrant communities in Germany. Consequently, German students rely mainly on the media-produced images of Africa, which continuously reproduce stereotypes. Africa is generally regarded as an underdeveloped continent in a permanent state of crisis, and its musical cultures are said to consist of only traditional drumming, dancing and joyful singing, most often in religious and ritual contexts.

In this situation, I found a method called 'phantom islands' to be helpful. Developed in the context of museum pedagogy in Germany, it uses imagination and creativity to construct a fictional place and culture to make students aware of the techniques of researching and curating an exhibition. In my

seminars, I transformed this method into a creative writing workshop in which students developed an ethnography about a fictional people group 'at the sources of the Nile'. This project gave students the possibility to work together on a project on which they later reflected critically. Through classroom discussions afterwards, they became aware of their individual images of Africa and understood the reasons for their stereotyped imaginations about African music. Moreover, the outcome of a fictional ethnography gave them insights into how ethnomusicological research is conducted and documented.

In this article, I aim to describe this teaching method and discuss the different outcomes of projects with four student groups in Berlin, Rostock and Bremen over 2014–2018. It became apparent that the students projected the expected elements (e.g. their own history and desires) onto the other and that their images of Africa depended on their own social surroundings and status in the university hierarchy. Drawing on this case, I argue that methods such as creative writing can be included in the teaching of ethnomusicology to enable students to strongly engage in seminars and realise the relevance of lessons.

'Phantom islands' as a method to mediate knowledge about the other

Simulation exercises are a frequently used tool in intercultural youth work in Germany. Groups are asked to perform the behaviours of fictional cultures and meetings and exchanges between cultures new to each other. In doing so, groups practice situations in unknown contexts and reflect on their

own perceptions of the foreign and the other (Reindlmeier 2009). Imagined ethnographies have also appeared in the area of popular music, such as the documentary film *FRAKTUS* (2012) about the reunion of a fictional techno-band, which satirised the standard form of journalism reports and challenged the writing of popular-music history.

Recently, the method of *performative ethnography* has become quite popular in several educational contexts (Menrath 2015). In the article 'Phantom islands for a transformative music mediation. A project of the Übersee-Museum in Bremen' (Menrath 2012), Stephanie Kiwi Menrath described her experiences designing a project in which a youth group developed a showcase for an exhibition on the musical culture of a fictional island. Based on historical sources about the phantom islands of Antilia, Crespo and Pepys, the group was asked to research what the music history of such an island might have been, how the music might have sounded and what kind of music instruments the inhabitants might have used. The group created exhibition texts, prepared instruments and composed the island's music. Through developing part of an exhibition in this way, the youths learned about the production of academic knowledge and got critical insights into the construction of the other within museum contexts.

Menrath's case study recently inspired several students in education and social work at the University of Applied Science Clara Hoffbauer in Potsdam to transfer the method to kindergarten and primary schools. Groups of children used their creativity to model and create fictional islands and invent their musical cultures. Afterwards, the groups

discussed the children's perceptions of the foreign and unknown and questions of diversity.

My interest was to find a way to discuss with my students their images of Africa (cf. Arndt 2006) and show them how these images influenced their daily behaviour towards blacks in Germany (cf. Sow 2009). The students were not to analyse typical examples of discrimination against blacks and Africa in advertisements and newspapers but to project their own worldviews without knowing the purpose beforehand. I, therefore, transferred Menrath's method to a creative writing workshop in which the students invented a fictional people group 'at the sources of the Nile'. By producing a complete ethnography focused on cultural performances, they created a corpus that could be used to critically discuss their views on Africa and to deconstruct their projections onto the other. They should also become aware of the reasons why they stereotyped African music. Through creating a people group whose music practices were closely linked to their cultural context, the students could understand why the ethnomusicological approach is based on the social life of peoples, not on musical works, stylistics and instruments. This point became especially important at music conservatories where students were taught music in the strict sense of the theory and the history of music works and had never heard of the anthropology of music.

The project design

The topic of 'the people at the sources of the Nile' was chosen as the exploration of the

sources of the Nile has a real historical background in the race among 19th-century British explorers, such as John Speke, Richard Burton and David Livingstone, who based their travel plans on vague references in historical sources. This topic also offered the possibility to locate a people group 'in the heart of Africa' where probably no students had ever gone. The students thus were forced to invent something for which they had no model, so they were likely to project their images of Africa onto that people group.

The project was divided into the initiation, creation, evaluation and reintegration phases. In the initiation phase, I distributed one page of information on the people group to provide a framework for the students to develop their ethnography. The text included three short fictional historical reports. The first was loosely connected to 'The Histories' by Herodot (about 450 BC) and gave a picture of the geography where the people group lived. The second was dated around 700 AD and referred to Arabian traders in contact with the people group. The students had the possibility to establish intercultural exchange between Arabian and African peoples and received some hints about the people group's material culture, including musical instruments. The last fictional report was about a French military company with musicians that became lost during Napoleon's exploration of Northern Africa over 1798–1801. This source allowed the students to connect a European culture, language and military system with an African society.

They had to build their narratives on this information but were free to integrate more influences or to describe different historical stages of their fictional people group. They were instructed to use no other sources and

not do any online research about the sources of the Nile. To stimulate the imagination of the students in the first group, I offered some chapters from the fictional travel guide *Molwanien: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry* (Cilauro and Sitch 2004), which presents exaggerated stereotypes of Eastern European countries. Later, I realised this was not necessary and that all the students already had enough creative ideas.

In the creation phase, the students were divided into five groups to develop different components of an ethnography. The first one described the geography, basic economic system and related cultural festivals of the people group. The second was asked to invent ideas about the people's outlook, language, social-political system and life feasts. The third group outlined the people's religion, including their world-view, morals, ethics and rituals. The fourth group gave an overview of the various professions and the social life of the fictional people group. Finally, the last group detailed the people group's musical instruments, singing styles, dances and songs. In two weekly seminars, the student groups were asked to develop their ideas and write 1–2 pages each week, which they shared with the next group that built its ideas on the previous group's text. In one seminar, the same student group performed the creation phase in five consecutive sessions to ensure the coherence of the story. In the last seminar, the five different groups invented their chapters at the same time and integrated them into one story at the end, which surprisingly did not cause any inconsistencies.

The main point of the project was the evaluation phase. First, I started to summarise the students' complete fictional ethnography in a short slideshow. For it, I

took the key concepts of their ethnography and searched online for images that supported their creative ideas and fit together. Surprisingly, I had no difficulty quickly finding existing images that could easily be interpreted as authentic pictures of the 'people group at the sources of the Nile'. Several times, the students applauded the slides, a clear sign they were surprised at the ease of creating a selection of images that gave the impression that something invented exists.

Afterwards, we engaged in an intense group discussion reflecting on the project, particularly the students' various projections and imaginations. I wrote all the project keywords from the five groups on cards and placed them on tables. Then I asked the students to group the cards several times and pin them on a wall to answer questions such as: 'When did you construct the other as a contrast to your own?' 'When did you project a European historical past onto the other?' 'When did you project your own desires or fears onto the other?' 'When did you use the other to criticise the hierarchies in which you live?' In a second round, we discussed the reasons for these projections in the same way: 'How does the media influence your image of Africa?' 'What impacts has your education had on your image of Africa?' 'To what extent is your knowledge of Africa based on individual experiences in Africa or with Africans?' 'What do you know about African music in general?'

In all projects, the discussions in this stage were very lively, and the students willingly and clearly perceived their own projections. The design of a joint project helped individuals not feel accused of holding the colonial and racist views they wrote in their parts of the ethnography. They realised what

they had created or accepted within the group work, but due to the fictional nature of the work, they did not feel guilty and could take it as the first stage in a learning process.

Finally, in the reintegration stage, I returned the students to the theoretical concepts of orientalism and postcolonial studies and encouraged them to select their individual musical topics for their seminar papers. With this experience and knowledge, it was easier for the students to analyse the constructions and projections in others' work and reflect on their own world-views and question how they used language when describing African music.

How do German students project the other?

In general, nearly all the students appreciated the project as they had never experienced the method within the university context. While engaged in the writing process and later discussions, they found out that their own participation and opinions in the seminar had meaning. Additionally, it was interesting to analyse the fictional ethnographies and see how the students constructed their imagined people groups.

In all the projects, the students based their geographical descriptions mainly on one region they already knew and mixed it with their knowledge of other non-European cultures. With the Nile giving the people group its name, ancient Egyptian civilisation served as a model for several groups. The political structure was sometimes constructed following the form of pharaonic courts, a detailed irrigation system was described, and a queen named 'Tra Pa Kleo'

(the inversed syllables of *Cleopatra*) appeared. The Nile also gave two groups the idea to connect the people group with the Indian Hindu culture of baptisms, annual feasts and funerals in streams. At the same time, many accounts of the animals and landscapes pointed to East African safari tours with elephants, hippos and zebras. Stereotypes of West African countries were only mentioned when describing the material culture with colourful clothes, make-up and drumming. In a few accounts, the students projected their own country onto the other with terms such as the 'Switzerland of Africa' and an annual feast called 'To Ok Ber' (the inversed syllables of the Bavarian *October* feast). Only in Berlin did the students try to connect their story to recent political developments in Africa, for instance, through exploitation of a raw material they called 'rigidium' (Ri). Yet, this could also have been an imitation of the raw material 'vibranium' from the *Black Panther* comics and their fictional African country Wakanda. In the following discussions, the students became aware of how their rather scant knowledge of non-European countries informed their construction of places they had never heard about.

In all the projects, the social structure of the people group was a projection of medieval European societies onto the other. Feudal societies with kingdoms and armies were described, while the normal people were cast as farmers, craftspeople and traders. Only in Bremen did the students create an extensive caste system, with an indigenous group responsible for the religion, a high-ranking caste of 'niloram' conducting commerce and separate migrant and slave castes. The projection of the historical past onto a recent other presented the opportunity to discuss

with the students the stereotype of 'the uncivilised and underdeveloped Africa' in the European imagination.

Regarding religion, all the students agreed that the people at the source of the Nile followed polytheist belief systems with myths recalling ancient Greek narratives. Again, the Nile and water were the central elements of all creation stories. Shamanic priests were seen as the 'watchers of the Nile' and maintainers of the world. The people group's ethics were always described as following a circle of life—a concept probably stemming from the Disney movie *The Lion King*. Classifying religions as forms of evolutionary systems opened up a discussion on the power relationship between western and non-European societies.

Racial imaginations were not strong but appeared in two groups. The Berlin students invented a new human species called 'homo baMuwiens' (*muwi* is the acronym for *musicology* in German) who had special singing and hearing abilities beyond the normal human range and could participate in a shared consciousness. The Bremen students' indigenous people group had dark-coloured skin and jade-green eyes. For both groups, the fictional Na'vi people group in the movie *Avatar* might have served as a model.

The language of the people group was most frequently described as a version of Arabic or Nile-Saharan languages with some French influences. In Berlin, the students also invented new expressions using onomatopoeias such as *rums ta*. The concept of cultural transfer or hybridisation thus was strong in this category and led to a discussion on the concepts of conflicts

between cultures and acculturation processes between cultures.

Completely new inventions rarely appeared. Only the students in Berlin imagined a new fruit called 'water potato' and the ability for one person to sing in polyphony and communicate in ultra- or intra-sounds.

Projection of personal fears onto the other never happened, although all the students were surely familiar with popular action and fantasy movies working with those emotions. Personal erotic desires and imaginations of different kinds of human relationships emerged occasionally but were not dominant, so the historical sexualisation of Africans was not reproduced. However, that could have resulted from the rather conservative academic settings where no one wanted to expose individual sexual fantasies.

In some projects, the students projected the hierarchy in the seminar onto the other by having fun with my name. In Berlin, the students invented a city named 'Rivanepo'. During the first project in Rostock, the students made up 'King N'po Muk I'. For the students in Berlin, humour played an especially important role. One group invented a drug that contrasted with the mentioned raw material 'rigidium'; instead, 'frigidum' reduced female fertility. These examples were used to discuss the trope of ridiculing the other within (post-)colonial contexts.

The musical practices were closely linked to the cultural expressions, such as sowing, harvest festivals and all rituals connected with the Nile. The invented instruments included a sounding water bowl and making music by hitting the rafts on the Nile. In 2016, the students in Rostock invented a myth

about a 'musical accident' in which drummers coincidentally drummed the self-resonance of the temple, which then collapsed, killing several people. In all the projects, the students generally presented two musical genres. The first was more meditative and repetitive and included singing and flute playing in minor scales, particularly at funerals and in religious setting to induce a trance. In some projects, it was also influenced by Arabian music with quartetone singing. The second musical genre was more entertaining, secular and joyful, with wild dances, drumming and singing. The influence of Arabic music and, to lesser degree, French music on the people group's culture was also mentioned several times. In this category, we discussed not only how our knowledge and experience influenced the way we project music onto the other but also the musical terms we used to talk about music in academic contexts. The Berlin students especially agreed that their recent knowledge from systematic musicology courses inspired their invention of the ability to hear ultra- and intra-sounds.

When discussing the reasons for the construction of these narratives in the second round, it became obvious to the students that most of their knowledge on Africa was derived from stereotyped media productions, such as news, documentaries and movies. They realised that they had not gained deep knowledge on Africa during high school. They admitted that none of them had even travelled to an African country or tried to acquire more objective academic knowledge on African cultures. Finally, they realised that most of the content they presented reflected not knowledge of foreign cultures but projections of their own cultures and European history.

The various groups presented some differences. The musicology students from Humboldt-University in Berlin were the most creative and clear. They had more diverse cultural backgrounds, and city life with its infinite possibilities of identity construction may have inspired them to inventions more than the other groups. The students at the Conservatory for Music in Rostock, who were mostly women in a teacher training programme, had more conformist worldviews but also lively fantasies. The musicology students at the University of Bremen were similar, even though they were all men. The project outcomes proved that the situations within society influenced the projection of the other.

Students' reactions and concluding thoughts

The students gave overall positive feedback. They liked the new, creative method, finding it to be 'exciting and useful', and they appreciated that their 'fantasy was stimulated' (HK, female student, Rostock, private email communication). They also noticed that the approach gave their self-generated input meaning. As one student in Rostock wrote: 'I liked this inductive approach very much as we became aware of our unconscious prejudices and reflexes as we constructed an unknown culture. Within academic teaching, in my opinion, there should be more project work instead of deductive, fact-based courses (MR, male student, Rostock, private email communication)'.

Some students expressed reservations about group work in general: 'Individual creativity is requested, although it gets controlled

throughout the exchanges with others. Unfortunately, I have to say that I don't like group work that much. I remember many situations in the past in which only some and not all members participated in the work. The overall result was only the result of a little group (NZ, female student, Rostock, private email communication)'. One student admitted that the group work was based primarily on only his ideas and that he did online research to be able to describe the geography and used a translation program to get Arabic expressions for his German terms (HG, male student, Rostock, private email communication).

The participants all agreed that they became more sensitive towards prejudices about Africa and African music: 'We all have our imaginations about other cultures that we articulate daily in certain forms but are based mostly on very limited knowledge. Many cultural practices are foreign to us as we have not experienced them in their cultures. In particular, the Eurocentric view that differentiates among nations, regions and their descendants and outlooks provided limited knowledge of global cultures' (HG, male student, Rostock, private email communication).

Some students were even inspired to use the method in the context of their own teaching. 'I believe this project fits not only into the context of higher education but also schools. Perhaps one day, I will have the chance to work with pupils on a similar project' (MR, male student, Rostock, private email communication). The students' responses also indicated that they understood why my teaching of ethnomusicology was based not on musical examples and music theories but on the ethnography of groups and regions. 'All in all, I became more curious about other

forms of music making. Music, for me, is not bound to determined forms or instruments anymore. Moreover, it is exciting to see how men have used music as medium in different times and different places' (HG, male student, Rostock, private email communication). In the examinations and papers the students wrote, they became more conscious about the terms they used to describe non-western people groups and music cultures. They tried to avoid generalisations and collective descriptions of cultural behaviours.

However, I also must acknowledge that by letting the students construct a people group somewhere in Africa from their imagination, I simultaneously permitted the reproduction of colonial and racist stereotypes. The information they got in the beginning was clearly formulated from a Western perspective that might even forced them to orientalise the fictional people group. I intentionally did not tell the students the purpose of the exercise from the beginning, so they would not restrict their imagination. Although we intensively deconstructed the project afterwards, and the students became aware of their own world-views, I cannot preclude that some of their inventions might have seemed so entertaining that they were later passed on to other persons outside of the seminar. A safe space for such projects, therefore, must be clearly defined. The students should be sensitised to the possibility that even the game-like situation of developing an ethnography where humour and caricature are permitted may have harmful influences outside the classroom.

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