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# INTERCULTURAL LEARNING IN DIALOGUE WITH MUSIC

## Everybody is Special – Nigerian Music Project at an Austrian Kindergarten

*Musical Inspiration: Yorùbá Lullabies*

*Translated by Anne Thomas*

“Be blessed when you grow up” – this heart’s desire from the Yorùbá lullaby *Omo* provided the inspiration for the *Everybody is special* kindergarten project. This desire became the whole project’s central point. The project then served as the basis for the MA dissertation (Foramitti 2007) that I wrote as part of my singing studies. The idea was to prove that the music of another culture (in this case the music of the Yorùbá) could touch and move others (children in Austria) in a particular way, and that the building of bridges between cultures can be facilitated by combining the aims of intercultural learning with that of music. The most important person and source of inspiration for me was Babátólá Alóba, both for the project and the ensuing MA thesis and analysis.

Babátólá was born in 1948 in Àkúré, Nigeria. He was educated at King’s College in Lagos, Nigeria. In Vienna, he received technical training from the *Höhere Technische Bundeslehranstalt HTL* [upper secondary school for technology] in Vienna and later trained to be a teacher at the University of Ilorin in Nigeria. From 1971 to 1977, Babátólá Alóba lived with his family in Vienna. He then returned to Nigeria where he wanted to bring up his children. Until 1986, he was employed as a technical lecturer, later becoming assistant lecturer at various polytechnics and institutes of higher education. Since 1988, he has been back in Vienna where he works for the city’s public transport system *Wiener Linien*. At the same time, he holds regular dance and drum workshops. He has also written about his culture, the Yorùbá. I first personally met Babátólá at one of his workshops at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna, quickly learning to value his

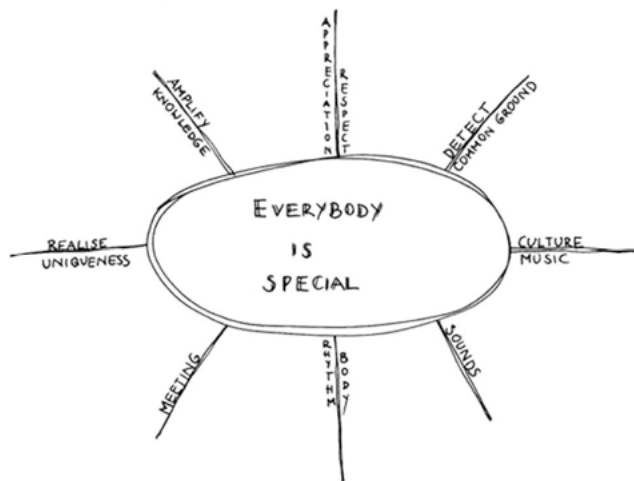


Fig. 1 – Diagram of the project's pillars.

personality and work. The book *Children's Songs*, which he compiled with Eva Steinhäuser (Alóba and Steinhäuser 1999), provided the musical basis of my MA thesis. The music of the Yorùbá and in particular the children songs inspired the kindergarten project.

The project involved taking certain cognitive and social elements of intercultural education literature and applying them to a concrete situation. The academic notion of 'diversity' – the idea that variety should be seen as a potential – links both applied ethnomusicology and intercultural learning to each other as well as to the topics of kindergarten education. "Diversity refers to all the imaginable differences and commonalities that bring people together in particular work or life contexts" (Kobelt-Neuhaus 2006: 4). This definition made it clear to me that the scope of applied ethnomusicology, the academic notion of 'diversity', and the aims of intercultural education had to be the pillars of the kindergarten project *Everybody is special*. Fig. 1 illustrates this idea.

Thanks to the social-pedagogical and capable work of the pedagogue Monika Matern at a kindergarten in Pöggstall in northern Austria, I realised that children aged between four and six are extremely thirsty for knowledge and very capable of learning. This realisation confirmed my theory that the building of bridges between cultures had to start with children. The basis for developing a positive approach to other cultures has to be laid in kindergarten; children have to be told about other cultures in order to prevent prejudices, which usually stem from a lack of knowledge, and they must learn to put such prejudice into context. I devised 13 different notions,

which had mainly to do with Africa, with the comparison of Austria and Nigeria, with Yorùbá music and culture, as well as with the music and rituals of Austrian culture. Between 18<sup>th</sup> September 2006 and 27<sup>th</sup> January 2007, I was able to put these ideas to the test at the Pöggstall kindergarten in northern Austria. During this time, I worked with a group of children, putting into practice the aims of intercultural learning on the basis of my devised notions.

The main question behind this project is whether music can help children of kindergarten age to come closer to an alien culture, to dispel fears about the other without developing any prejudices. What is felt to be 'other' is disconcertingly 'other' only if one does not have any engagement with it. It is rare that discomfort, or alienation, is not accompanied by fear. But in general, children have a tendency to be naturally free of prejudice. I wanted the children to engage with foreign objects and people before judging them. Each of the 13 notions has this key aim. In each unit, we engaged with music in one form or other. We sang, clapped, danced, and drummed. We also listened to music and watched music videos from Nigeria. There were also different rituals, each having a fixed place in the respective units. For example, at the beginning of each unit, the children received a letter from Kasimir the Mouse. In each letter, Kasimir talked about the experiences he had had during his trip to Nigeria – the experiences were of course connected to the unit's particular theme.

The following 13 points give a brief explanation of each notion:

### **1. Africa – the continent**

The aim of this unit was to give the children an initial insight. This unit was for the children to find out, see and in part also taste what this continent has to offer. It was supposed to awaken their curiosity for and interest in Africa.

### **2. Nigeria – Austria – common ground and differences**

In this unit, the children learnt how to get to know their own country better whilst at the same time learning about another unknown country. They looked at pictures of animals, food and raw materials, sorting them according to the two countries. They were thus able to identify the rough differences between the countries. The unit's aim was to awaken the children's curiosity for and interest in a foreign country and its culture.

### **3. Children in Nigeria**

In this unit, the children played games that children of their age in Nigeria like to play. Through playing, the aim was that they should realise that



*Fig. 2 – Children listening to letter from Kasimir.*

All photos by Christina Foramitti

these games could also be fun. This realisation was supposed to lead them to the thought that they are similar to the children in Nigeria and there is a link between them. The songs of the games awakened and developed their feeling for rhythm. This unit was also intended to trigger a positive group dynamic.

#### **4. Everybody is special**

Here, the aim was to make the children aware of how important and good it is to resemble others in certain senses but to be allowed to be different, special and unique in others. On balance, the conclusion was as follows: If it is true for every child in the group then it is true for everyone on earth, that whatever one's nose or ears look like, whatever one's hair or skin colour is and wherever one is from, *Everybody is special*.

#### **5. Dancing and movement**

This unit was for the children to get to know music from different cultures and also for them to express themselves through movement. The unit was about promoting the fun that music brings and the unavoidable movements it inspires. It was important that the children experienced different styles of music and realised that they all had equal value. This unit was about experiencing in practice that being different does not mean being better or worse!



*Fig. 3 – Children thinking about how they can help others.*

## **6. Slavery and poverty**

In this unit, the children learnt about Nigeria's colonial past, as well as about the Yorùbá. The main 'lesson' of this unit was that there should be an equal balance between give and take. The children also made suggestions about how they could help other children who were not as privileged as they are.

## **7. Go to sleep, my little one – lullabies**

Music brought the children to a place of trust in this unit. They found out what lullabies are and learnt different German-language lullabies as well as Yorùbá lullabies. They also talked about their own bed-time habits and rituals. They found out about their friends' habits and I told them about the differences and similarities there were with those of another culture, namely Yorùbá.

## **8. Rhythm is everywhere – a workshop with Benno Sterzer, musician and music therapist**

The aim of this unit was for the children to experience, feel, and acquire rhythm in all its force and variety. They also got to know the basic techniques of different rhythmic instruments. New ideas and objects thus helped the children find out about life on a different continent.



*Fig. 4 – Children playing the djembe.*



*Fig. 6 – Daddy Frog, Sun, Kasimir and Birdmum.*



*Fig. 5 – Christina Foramitti and children working on Báyí làwá sowópò [This way we reach out our hands to each other].*



*Fig. 7 – Monika Matern and Babátólá.*

## 9. A story-game

In this unit, the children were called upon to concentrate in order to awaken their imagination. The central piece of information transmitted was that everyone is special and lovable. During the second reading of the story, the children acted out roles and became active participants. They each took responsibility for a particular part and thus contributed to the success of the whole. The feeling of togetherness was once again of the utmost importance.



*Fig. 8 – Children doing batik.*



*Fig. 9 – Children painting to music.*

### **10. A story of sound**

As in the previous unit, here the intention was that the children would, with gentle persuasion, take responsibility. The goal was to create a small piece of art together. It was imperative that there be a feeling of community, extreme concentration and attention for the theatre performance to be a success.

### **11. Workshop with Babátólá Alóba**

Here, the children were able to actually ‘touch’ somebody from Nigeria. They were able to talk to him and ask him about things that they had found out about in the stories. They were fascinated by him physically. They touched his dark hands when they greeted him and observed his dark eyes, his clothes, and his hair. They saw that he was a lovable person. It was surely a very memorable experience for the children to meet Babátólá.

### **12. Tie-dyeing tunics [Batik]**

On this morning, each child made his or her own tunic using a Yorùbá dyeing technique. Thus they had the chance to come into close contact with a Yorùbá art form. They discovered the beauty of this ‘simple’ dying technique – at least ‘simple’ in the way we practised it.

### **13. Painting to Nigerian and Austrian music**

The children once again engaged with the different musical styles of two cultures and expressed these differences by painting intuitively. It was an important experience for the children to let themselves go free without speaking to a piece of Austrian music and Yorùbá music respectively.

The special way of planning, preparing, and implementing the *Everybody is Special* project was based on ten academic ideas developed by Wolfgang Nieke (Nieke 1993: 55f). Building on ideas developed by the education expert Manfred Hohmann, the German university professor for general pedagogy devised the following system for dividing intercultural education into ten different learning aims (Böhle 1996: 117f).

#### **1. The recognition of one's own unavoidable ethnocentrism**

To recognise what is one's own has to do with researching one's own everyday life and environment. Nieke's idea of ethnocentrism seems correct and very important in this context because if children are not aware of their own roots, values and culture they cannot be open to and curious about something new. The children need to be able to relate to facts that seem logical to them; they need points of association, emotional and cognitive, as well as logically explainable connections between their own experiences and new information about alien habits in other cultures (Böhle 1996: 116). This aim was one of the project's most important aspects, both in its conception and its implementation. In each unit, it was important that the children be able to make a connection with something they had already experienced and were familiar with.

#### **2. Dealing with disconcertment/alienation**

Here, Nieke claims that other impressions always carry something mysterious and thus interesting. But if one has never learnt to be open to all people and all kinds of encounters, then the other can also be experienced as disconcerting and alienating, thus leading to fear and rejection. In such cases, it depends on the individual and the way one has learnt to deal with fear, and whether he or she will be able to transform this strong feeling into a positive one. Here, intercultural education works on emotional experiences and communication potential.

#### **3. The foundations of tolerance**

In my opinion, the word tolerance in conjunction with intercultural learning is poorly chosen. Tolerance stems from the Latin word *tolerare*, which means to bear, to endure, or to support. I prefer to speak of respect. The establishment of respect for people who live in another culture is a very



important part of intercultural learning. To this aim it has to be made very clear that it is a question of establishing mutual respect. In my work with the children and my analysis of the project, openness and mutual respect were of great significance.

#### 4. Acceptance of ethnicity

The word 'acceptance' also stems from the Latin word *accipere*, and among other things it means to accept something. But unfortunately this implies that there exists a certain hierarchical order. So here too respect or the respect of ethnicities is a better choice of word for promoting the equality of cultures. By acceptance of ethnicity Nieke means engaging positively with the 'differentness' of another culture. Visual differences, as well as the way of preparing food or the different rituals or festivals of various faiths, as well as different language all fall into this category (Böhle 1996: 117).

#### 5. Addressing the subject of racism

Racism depends on a rigid regard for the habitual idea or image of society. This particular aim was purposely not integrated into the project because I intended for the subject to be approached in a positive manner in the sense that *Everybody is special*. The subject of racism was only supposed to be addressed if the children made comments that might be considered racist. But this was never the case throughout the duration of the five-month project.

#### 6. Emphasizing commonalities

It became very clear through the work with the children why intercultural learning is so important. The children have to be able to find points of association with their own prior knowledge and feelings. In order to open up to another culture one has to recognise commonalities, allow for them and also rejoice in them.

#### 7. Encouraging solidarity

'Solidarity' also stems from the Latin and means "a feeling of belonging and the willingness to stand up for one another". But in this definition of Nieke's the encouragement of mutual solidarity, which is of utmost importance, is missing. Even those who belong to 'minorities', as Nieke describes them, can and have to strive for solidarity within the whole. Only then can we talk of the equality of cultures. What is important regarding work with children and the encouragement of solidarity is that it has to be made clear to the children that every person has the right to be different (Böhle 1996: 118).



*Fig. 10 – Babátólá Alóba opens the presentation by performing a drum session.*

#### **8. Practising forms of reasonable conflict resolution – dealing with cultural conflict and cultural relativism**

Resolving conflict plays a great role in the everyday lives of children. Children have to learn how to deal with conflict and how to resolve it. They have to have an understanding of the notions of respect, for which they must have a generally positive attitude towards the other. This pedagogical work begins at home, in one's own culture, in one's own family, and one's own environment; then it has to be integrated into kindergarten educational science daily so that it can exert a positive influence if a conflict between cultures does arise (interview with Monika Matern, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2007).

#### **9. Identifying possibilities of mutual cultural enrichment**

Here too the question is of a balanced give-and-take relationship between two or more cultures. The aim is to raise the awareness that everybody can learn from the other. Only then can a dialogue develop that enables mutual cultural enrichment. Becoming aware of mutual cultural enrichment and allowing it forms the beginning of social and cultural opening and is a prerequisite for peaceful co-existence. It is the task of intercultural education to stimulate and promote this idea of mutual give-and-take through didactic methods.

#### **10. The lifting of the 'us' barrier in global responsibility**

This aim of intercultural education has to be regarded as a particular concern not only from a socio-cultural angle but also in terms of the near and distant future with regard to the current debate about global warming, and especially climate change. From the point of view of intercultural education,

the 'us' barrier has to be newly defined so that 'we' as people can face up to our global responsibility. In this sense 'we' or 'us' are people: When it comes to global responsibility, everybody counts and matters (Böhle 1996: 119). The project focused in particular on recognising one's own uniqueness, emphasising commonalities and promoting mutual cultural enrichment. Becoming aware of one's own roots and the feeling of security that thus arose made it possible within my project for participants to behave openly towards other cultures. By knowing themselves, commonalities that were of extreme importance for the children could be highlighted. The recognition of similarities and the creation of a direct relationship with the 'other' enabled certain fears to be dispelled. The encounter with Babátólá Alóba was very important for the children in this respect. The joint public presentation of the project as part of the *Kasimir discovers Nigeria* sound theatre play was important in terms of public relations, especially with the children's parents.

The message that *Everybody is special* was able to reach a wide audience thanks to the presentation and articles about it. The whole project allowed the children to open another window to the world (interview with Monika Matern, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2007). In the hope that the desire from the song *Omo* will be fulfilled every day I make efforts to carry the thought *Everybody is Special* in me, although the project is over. Be blessed when you grow up!

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