

## **Exploring Children's Musical Culture in Ethnomusicology**

BY

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In *Fieldwork with Children*, Robyn Holmes posits that researchers represent children in the following manner: “children as primitive, children as copycats, children as personality trainees, children as monkeys, and children as critics” (Holmes 1998: 108-111). She maintains that researchers portray children according to their own training in a specific field as “research orientations and theoretical perspectives are pervasive factors that can influence fieldworkers’ interpretations of children’s culture” (Holmes 1998: 108). In the fields of anthropology and ethnomusicology the representation of children has adhered to these biases and relatively few scholars have attempted to understand the culture of the child free from the domination of adult culture. Children’s experiences and autonomous musical communities have been bound in an adult/child dichotomy that dismisses their self-created existence by viewing them as the ‘other’.

In this paper I will outline (briefly) the study of children’s musical cultures in the field of ethnomusicology, and its history within related disciplines. With focus on John Blacking’s work with Venda children, I will analyze the development of the academic study of the musical culture of children and the impact of his work on the present study of children’s music within ethnomusicology. The research I am presenting here is a small segment of a larger bibliographic research project and is representative of my interest in studying children’s musical cultures. I welcome ideas and comments on my very, preliminary work.

Scholars previously assumed that the adult perspective was greater than or equal to that of a child (in that the voice of the adult could be representative of the voice of the child). Holmes states that this is due “in part to the notion that children’s social and cultural worlds are imperfect in comparison to the adult world they will eventually enter. Children’s life experiences in their social worlds and peer cultures are presumably viewed as unimportant because the goal of socialization is to produce a

culturally competent adult” (Holmes 1998: 1-2). Children’s culture, that is the child-to-child transmission of knowledge and information, has been dismissed as an insignificant component of the greater, dominant adult culture.

The failure to acknowledge that children themselves can be the creators of their own culture, parallels the representation of women within academic scholarship and the theories that have been produced with regards to the ‘othering’ of women’s experiences within such a system can be equally applied to the study of children.

In Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of feminism she states, “between patriarchal subject-formation and imperialist object-constitution, it is the place of the free will or agency of the sexed subject as female that is successfully effaced” (Spivak 1999: 235). In anthropology children are represented, in effect, as the ‘female’, therefore eradicated through the dichotomy of adult and child. Even though this dichotomy perhaps does exist, the scholar assumes that they are able to represent children through a discussion of the dominant adult group or children’s interactions with adult culture, much as it was assumed that women could be represented through the study of men. Using feminist theory to study children, therefore, is “an attempt to move away from notions of ‘the’ child, much as feminist theory itself has moved away from assumptions about ‘the’ woman” (Chin 2001: 129).

Prior to John Blacking’s ethnographic study of Venda children’s songs in 1967, scholarship on children’s music focused on game songs, particularly in North America and Western Europe. The study of children’s music originated with an interest in the collection of children’s songs and games, assembled, not for the critical examination of children’s musical culture, but rather as collections for the purpose of comparison or performance. The songs collected were associated with children’s games and rhymes, most obviously from Western adult perspectives that failed to explore the creation of music from a child’s perspective. One of the most prolific collectors, Alice Gomme, published two volumes titled *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, in 1894 and 1898. Gomme believed that “children do not invent, but they imitate or mimic very largely, and in many of these games we have, there is little doubt, unconscious folk-dramas of events and customs which were

at one time being enacted as a part of the serious concerns of life before the eyes of children many years ago” (Gomme 1894: x).

The collection of children’s music and games figures more prominently in the study of children’s play in fields such as anthropology, folklore, and music education rather than in ethnomusicology. Ethnomusicology, as a field, tends to exclude children’s play from the study of musical cultures because of academia’s fixation on the ‘serious’. Children have an assumed association with play (‘fun’), which opposes academia’s persistent relationship with the study of ‘serious’. Studying children’s music is associated with the study of ‘fun’ and historically, academia has been solely fixated on the study of all things ‘serious’ because play was what people did *outside* of the academic citadel.

Some ethnomusicologists have, however, attempted to frame their study of children’s play and games songs within the methodology of ethnomusicology.

As an example, ethnomusicologist Margaret Kartomi published an article in 1980 titled “Childlikeness in Play Studies - A Case Study Among the Pitjantjara at Yalata, South Australia”, which drew on John Blacking’s earlier ideas about children’s creative musical processes. Kartomi concludes, “the children are not just little people learning to become adults. They have sets of values of their own which are expressed in and expressive of communal and individual play situations, and which include certain unique musical attitudes and preferences” and that “children’s play songs exist as an identifiable musical type” (Kartomi 1980: 209).

In the field of ethnomusicology and beyond, John Blacking’s text, *Venda Children’s Songs*, became the springboard for studying children’s music as an autonomous culture. Blacking’s work with Venda children in the Northern Transvaal of South Africa began with his interest in the analysis of music as a basis for the structure of communities. His theories, however, were quickly modified when he discovered the complex, unique musical systems of the Venda children. Blacking states: “My special interest in Venda children’s songs was aroused when I noted that many of them *sounded* unlike other items of Venda music” (Blacking 1967: 5).

Blacking was truly excited about the direction in which ethnomusicology was moving because he believed that now music could be understood within a cultural framework. Although Blacking was sometimes criticized for using Western notation in this text, his attempt was not to notate individual songs precisely, but rather to capture the essence of children's music so that he could examine the transformations of musical culture (how music can be viewed as a transformation of another aspect of culture within the daily lives of children). These transformations were what drew Blacking to the study of children and what continues to interest scholars in the field. Although Blacking never concluded that children's culture was self-inscribed, he did challenge the notion that children were mere copycats, incapable of self-creativity through his application of Alan Merriam's theory that music is human action in culture and through his own belief in the importance of the study of children's music.

In *Venda Children's Songs* Blacking used the term "children's musical culture". His formal analysis of Venda children's songs maps out patterns and structure found in the music. He posits that his own analysis reveals other influences in the music rather than just form, rhythm, and melody (Blacking 1976: 196). Through comparison and musical analysis Blacking explored both the formality of children's musical enculturation and its manifestations within and from the greater Venda culture.

The adults of Venda culture, according to Blacking, did not directly influence the music of Venda children, but indirectly children encompassed the music of adults within their own musical culture. Blacking also exposed the non-musical factors that regulated the musical lives of children: function, gender, speech-tones, and time of year and day. It is these factors, coupled with the melodic and harmonic structure which make Venda children's songs an intrinsic part of Venda children's culture which is propagated and created by Venda children, for Venda children.

Blacking used this functionalist approach as a framework for his attempt to understand why children's music did not *sound* like adult music in Venda culture and why their music did not progress from simple to complex but rather in seemingly erratic juxtapositions of simple and complex. It was Blacking's theory that "musical styles can be compared only when their meaning in context is fully understood, both

‘internally’ in relation to other styles in the same tradition, and ‘externally’ in relation to the culture in which they occur” (Blacking 1967: 197).

Blacking examined the melodic and harmonic structure of Venda children’s songs in order to compare their structural relationship to the songs of Venda adults. What Blacking concluded is that Venda children do create their own melodies which are derived from, but also very different from, the melodic structures that they hear in everyday life: Furthermore, he notes “there is no reason why at least some children’s songs should not have been originally composed by children” (Blacking 1967: 179). Blacking states that, “one might say that several of the Venda children’s songs are transformations of the models of the reed-pipe dances in the ‘language’ of children’s life” (Blacking 1967: 197).

Blacking attempted to focus academic attention on children as a sovereign musical culture which is capable of spontaneous musical creativity. However influenced children’s music in Venda culture is by the adult culture, Blacking acknowledged that children encompassed the musical structures and melodies they heard in daily life, whether from adults or children, into a unique musical culture that created music in the “language” of children that is transmitted from child to child, rather than simply from adult to child.

The 1987 Denver conference titled “The Biology of Music Making: Music and Child Development” made the study of children its main focus. In her opening article in the collection, Helen Myers raises several questions on the study of children’s music: do children have an autonomous musical culture? Do children learn music exclusively from adults? Are there any universals among children’s music? How does children’s music reflect the social structure of a community? (Myers 1990: 66). These are the questions that have been raised by the ethnomusicological study of children and questions that Blacking continued to ask of his ethnomusicological peers. At the root of all of these is the question of children’s sovereign musical culture and where children fit into the larger scope of musical communities. Myers states, “children’s music has not been a popular topic in ethnomusicology, indeed many published

studies which claim to treat the entire music of a culture fail to make any mention of children's music" (Myers 1990: 65) and this was as late as 1990.

New approaches to the ethnomusicological study of children have become more widespread in recent years. Two significant contributions are Kyra Gaunt's dissertation, and soon to be published book, in 1997 titled *The Games Black Girls Play: Music Body and 'Soul'* and Patricia Campbell's book in 1998 titled *Songs in Their Heads: Music and Its Meaning in Children's Lives*. These two texts represent how the study of children's musical culture is beginning to emerge as a viable subject in the field of ethnomusicology.

Ultimately, Blacking's work examined a core of songs from Venda children and explored how these songs did and did not relate to the adult musical culture. Although there is no doubt that the songs of the children were in some way influenced by the musical and harmonic structures of Venda adult music there was question as to who composed children's songs and how they were propagated between children. Blacking concluded that children's music in Venda culture existed as self-efficient, that is children took what they heard in their daily lives, be that from other children or from adults, and used the melodic structures to compose and create music in the language of childhood. In most cultures, music of children and adults share certain properties, but what Blacking attempted to do was to give credit to children as creative individuals who mothered a musical culture which was unique to themselves, which in turn paved the way for the study of children's music within ethnomusicology.

In the case of Venda, however, there is a clear shift from child to adult as children are transformed to adults during a period of puberty initiation rites. This transformation from child to adult is, however, very difficult to encapsulate in words. As adults it is perhaps impossible to truly comprehend this transition because as the mind is transformed one does not completely remember the state of being *before* the transformation. Although there are clear memories, it is the actual state of being, the essence of childhood, which is forgotten. Therefore, is it possible to comprehend and study the state of childhood once one has passed through this transformation or is it a period that will forever escape the scholar's grasp?

The idea that children are creators is expressed in the work of several scholars, most recently Gaunt and Campbell who also convey a need for the study of the creative capacities of children. Blacking expressed that “there is no doubt that Venda children could perform adult music, but they do not do so because each social group has its associated style of music, its audible badge of identity” (Blacking 1967: 29). The idea that children have an identity which is not directly imposed upon them by adults, but rather an identity which is gained through a complex set of mitigating factors which are regulated by children themselves, acknowledges the generative side of children’s culture. Therefore, just as we cannot understand the musical culture of one group of people from studying another, we cannot assume that we understand the musical makeup of children through the study of adult music. As Blacking and many scholars after him have advocated, it is imperative to acknowledge that our studies are limited and that children must be one focus of study as they themselves offer a unique window into the study of musical culture and its diversity within. One must be open to the idea that music can flow both ways, that childhood can influence adulthood and that musical diversity can be examined through an in-depth study of children’s unique musical cultures, that children can be progenitors of adult culture, creating and fostering their future communities.

The study of children’s musical culture requires a multifaceted approach that exposes the complexity of deconstructing the Western based definition of the child as the ‘other’. This area is slowly becoming visible in the field of ethnomusicology. As scholars begin to pay closer heed to the role of children within culture and society we begin to broaden our perception of the greater conception of childhood. Although this change in perception does not happen immediately, the objective of studies and panels at conferences is for academia to give greater credence to the individuality and creativity of children within society and their contribution to the growth and change that happens within their surroundings.

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