Prof Meki Nzewi is an unusual man – someone who would be described as a maverick in any kind of milieu, especially an academic one. His unconventional approach to the study of music has at its heart the desire to recognise the value of traditional musical practices. From his uplifting Soccajasco Kids project to his controversial Sangoma Dance Aesthetic and his Mother’s Milk, Mother’s Muse project, Nzewi is proving that the music and dances of a person’s own culture have an extraordinary healing and transformative power.

Prof Meki Nzewi is ‘n ongewone man – iemand wat in enige milieu, veral ‘n akademiese een, as vry-denkend beskou kan word. Sy onkonvensionele benadering tot die studie van musiek spruit uit ‘n innige begeerte om erkenning van die waarde van tradisionele musiekpraktyke. Van sy opheffende ‘Soccajasco Kids’-projek tot sy omstrede Sangoma Dansestetiek en sy Moedersmelk, Moedersmuse-projek bewys Nzewi dat die musiek en danse van ‘n persoon se eie kultuur ‘n buitengewone helende en transformerende krag het.
Prof Meki Nzewi realised that indigenous children’s musical arts practices are disappearing and consequently also the enormous human values entrenched in these practices. Songs and dances that have been passed down from generation to generation connect with societal knowledge systems and are as such a critical resource base for the study of mythology and other cultural knowledge creations. These are now being replaced by synthetic, foreign alternatives that de-culturate children and promote dissociation from cultural values, moral virtues and a secure identity.

Apart from John Blacking’s Venda children’s song (1967) and the FAK songbook, there is no notable study or documentation of the indigenous knowledge heritage that formed the cultural character of our country’s little children. The question now is whether it would be possible to bring up humanly sensitised children in a scientific-technological global trend where children’s early nurture and virtue orientation are of synthetic or ‘cow’s milk’ metaphors?

Mother’s Milk, Mother’s Muse

In his Mother’s Milk, Mother’s Muse project, Nzewi is planning a multi-faceted research-reorientation project aimed at giving contemporary relevance to the indigenous musical arts activities of all culture groups in South Africa. The research aspect of this project will elicit the human, historical, moral and social texts embedded in children’s musical arts. He then plans on producing an annotated encyclopaedia (with musical/ action transcriptions), books, articles and other publications that will inculcate African knowledge heritage in the education of children.

The project will focus primarily on indigenous musical arts creations for children between the ages of one and twelve, although attention will be paid to the musical interests of teenagers, too.

A comprehensive recording (video and audio) of live performances by the children involved in the project is intended for archival purposes, while an advancement reorientation will develop theatre arts material to be acted by children for stage and television presentations. The effect of modernisation and globalisation will be studied while contemporary creations of children’s games by children will be reflected in the research.

Nzewi aims to re-motivate community musical arts creativity and performances of strong cultural value and with strong nation-building impact for recreational-education purposes. These creations will be based on current human and national issues such as health concerns (particularly AIDS) family values and self-enterprise. The project aims to involve not only teachers and professionals, but also parents and guardians. Additionally it will result in the production of indigenous research-sensitised scholars who will earn postgraduate degrees through participating in the research.

The project is planned in four sequenced phases over four years and started at the end of 2003 with workshops where Musical Arts Action Research Teams (MAT) cells received comprehensive briefing on collecting material and planning festivals. MAT cells were initiated by the Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education (PASMAE), each comprising a research team of music teachers from primary to tertiary education level.

There are 28 MAT cell teams, two in each of the following culture groups: Zulu, Xhosa, Tsonga, Venda, Pedi (Northern Sotho), Tswana, Ndebele, Lobedu, Swazi, Southern Sotho, Afrikaans, Indian, Cape Malay and English.

The primary task of the MAT cells is to instigate musical arts research and performance activities, documenting as many as are available. An average of 50 different items of musical arts, ranging from folk songs to folk tales to children’s games and dances could be provided by every school community, noting that encouragement will be given to children to create new songs and tales.

The MAT cells will also prepare the children research-participants for performances that will be recorded. As soon as a
MAT cell group is ready to present the performance of the children at its research site, a community performance event will be staged for video recording, inviting the community audience. The event will be a strategic opportunity for research teams to study performance aesthetics, to involve culture owners in probing and determining cultural texts with actual performance contexts and to cross check the research documentation from each MAT cell group.

No newcomer to research reorientation projects

The concept of research reorientation is not a new one for Nzewi. He arrived at the University of Pretoria’s Music Department in June 2000 from Nigeria where he has completed a number of research reorientation projects on African cultural arts. At the Ama Dialog Foundation, which he founded in Nigeria, Nzewi focused on reorientation projects such as the environmental paint-drawing art of rural Igbo women of Nigeria, the modern performance reorientation of Africa’s masking practices, and Kunje, a modern theatre creation of African poetic dances. He also did musical theatre work with street children in Nigeria and has produced numerous children’s opera dramas. In South Africa Nzewi has already achieved great success with his Soccajasco Kids.

Soccajasco Kids

Soccajasco Kids is a group of young disadvantaged South African children from shelters for street children. They have been trained as African modern classical drummers, singers and dancers through a musical arts project intended to rehabilitate as well as equip them with lifelong skills. Nzewi initiated this project in 2000 to advance the developmental energy of traditional creative genius into contemporary professional stage events.

The Soccajasco dance is a series in six episodes with an overture. Each episode, in the original spirit of African traditional music, reflects or parodies an aspect of world soccer. Episodes are linked with sections of the South African gumboot dance and other unique cultural dances. The choreographed dances are outlined by drum music. The six episodes are entitled ‘Pass the ball’, ‘Head the ball’, ‘Dribble the ball’, ‘It’s a foul’, ‘Oh, referee’ and ‘Penalty shootout’.

The Soccajasco Kids are artistically versatile performers who give public performances of professional standards in South Africa and overseas. According to Nzewi the value of traditional tribal drumming is only now being appreciated in the Western world where it is incorporated in anti-stress treatments. The Soccajasco Kids therefore not only perform on stage; each member is an accomplished master drummer and has the ability to give workshops. Apart from the stress relief and creativity drumming workshops that they have been conducting, Nzewi also plans to involve them in schools, thereby linking up with his Mother’s Milk, Mother’s Muse project.

Soccajasco Kids is registered as a Section 21 Company – a non-profit organisation. It is run under the auspices of the Music Department and is dedicated to the training, empowerment and welfare of the children on the project. Child Welfare has recognised the project as a ‘first’ and ‘unique’.
Sangoma Dance Aesthetic

Nzewi’s ability to marry an ancient indigenous South African dance heritage with a modern style that has international appeal is also evident in his Sangoma Dance Aesthetic, a research reorientation of a unique South African poetic dance style.

The research is supported by MMINO, the South African–Norwegian Education and Music Programme, a partnership with the Norwegian Concert Institute, which aims to strengthen South African musical culture. The first dance performances were produced in October and November 2003. The project aims to research and produce a modern dance theatre deriving from the indigenous Sangoma/Inyanga poetic dance style of South African cultures.

Nzewi adapted the traditional dances so that they could be choreographed on the modern stage. The result was a new African classical dance, the Sangojasco – a bold venture to promote the entertainment art integrity of the Sangoma musical arts style, which in another dimension of applied creative aspiration is a primary medi-cure agency.

Nzewi explained that staging the artistic-aesthetic merits of the dance typical to African traditional doctors promotes the noble image of the traditional medical science that sustained life and community in Africa over millennia. He added that the Sangoma medical practice still has a crucial role to play in health care and health cure delivery in contemporary South Africa.

The Sangoma Dance Aesthetic research project has two aspects: the first is a field study of artistic-aesthetic content and the associated dynamics of the musical arts component of the Sangoma healing theatre in contextual performance sites, and the second is the experimental study in non-contextual rehearsal sites of the potentials of Sangoma dance artistry for primarily contemplative, contemporary dance theatre.

A scholarly paper on indigenous poetic dance in South Africa, from traditional to modern creativity, deriving from these research and production experiences is planned for 2004. The paper will focus on the analytical study of the relationship between dance, healing and super-ordinary emanations and is eagerly awaited by everyone who has always suspected that music has healing properties.

Nzewi has firmly set his sites on proving that music can heal – not only on a physiological level but also psychologically. “Music is life energy,” he explained “and after you have performed, you can feel that something has changed inside of you – forever.” No wonder Nzewi has had such success with reorientation projects such as the Soccajasco Kids. However, he is sure to remind one that the success of these projects is not due to his own abilities, but could only be attributed to the transformative power of music and dancing.

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