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## **African and Western Views of Rhythm Literacy and their Implications for the Teaching of Music in Zimbabwean Primary Schools**

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### **Abstract**

This article is a comparative synthesis of ideas on rhythm literacy emanating from scholarship on African and Western music. Some of the views put forward are part of research findings on teaching music from the cultural repertoire of the child and from research on multi-cultural music education. A comparison is made between the way Africans and Westerners learn and perform their rhythms. This is done in a bid to promote the use of cultural song repertoire by the teacher when teaching African children. The article explores issues relating to knowledge of the general nature and scope of African music, in order to facilitate the development of musical literacy among children in the primary school. The article concludes by suggesting ways of extracting and teaching content from Shona traditional songs for the purpose of developing rhythm literacy.

### **Introduction**

Literacy is one of the main goals of contemporary primary education. Studies have shown that literacy gives access to information and promotes thinking processes. Every child should, therefore, leave the primary school with the ability to read and write in a range of language systems including music. In music education, children should have literacy skills to enable them to access information that leads to performance and appreciation of music. The ability to read and write music becomes one of the primary aims of teaching music in primary schools in addition to other performance skills. Studies have also shown that songs are the basis for developing musical concepts and literacy in primary schools. Choksy (1988) gives examples of how Zoltan Kodaly of Hungary contributed to the development of musical literacy in that country using folk songs. In Zimbabwe, Brown (1987) uses songs in the classroom as is evident in all her series of "Rhythm and Song" for various grades in the primary schools. In discussing the "Dalcroze Approach", Landis and Carder (1990) explain the use of song and solfege in the development of literacy in young children. The art of performing in a more refined way is also developed through literacy concepts. Songs are, therefore, central to teaching musical concepts that lead to musical literacy.

While musical literacy implies reading, writing, and interpreting both rhythm and pitch from notation, the fundamental basis for developing that literacy is rhythm. This is why children's music education literature throughout the world begins with rhythmic

notation. In discussing multi-cultural music education, Campbell (1991) cites how children in many cultures tend to be attracted by percussive instruments and this becomes their first music making experience. Apart from a few pitched percussion instruments, most percussion instruments handled by children articulate rhythm and not pitch. When children play their singing games, body percussion and movement are dominant in the whole play session. In the Zimbabwean context, children, particularly Shona children, join in the early hours of the all night events such as *bira*. They are quick to imitate their elders in hand clapping and other percussive musical articulations which are objects of rhythm articulation. This justifies rhythm literacy as the starting point in the development of musical literacy.

The subject of rhythm in African music can be quite complex especially as we try to take music of the oral tradition and use it for the development of literacy. It is, therefore, necessary to take a close look at the African music texture especially in terms of rhythm in order to understand the performance practice in terms of rhythm articulation within the integral whole of music performance in the traditional context. Understanding rhythmic structures will enable us to extract teaching content and design activities that are rooted in the traditional styles yet fulfilling the objective of developing musical literacy.

One of the greatest challenges that Zimbabwean music educators face is knowledge of their own music. While we know a lot of Shona and Ndebele traditional songs, we tend to take a lot of musical elements for granted. We still have to find the best ways to make use of the cultural repertoire in teaching musical elements such as rhythm and pitch. We also need to know our music and be able to analyse it from both the aural and visual point of view. Since literacy is the subject of this paper, notation becomes the core method of analysis so that we can be able to extract musical concepts for teaching purposes.

It is commonly accepted in the circles of music education and ethnomusicology that African music is characterised by complex rhythms. Why is that notion so prevalent? Is it not true that all music contains some complex rhythm in one way or the other and that African music isn't any different? In order to answer these questions, an analysis of rhythm from Western and African music perspectives is presented.

### Understanding rhythm from the Western perspective

The Western perspective of rhythm is broad in terms of definition and embraces all aspects that have to do with time duration in a musical composition. Some scholars define rhythm in terms of its distinctness from pitch, while others make some distinct differences between rhythm and meter but acknowledge their relationship. Kennedy (1985) discusses rhythm in terms of groupings of which he makes the following analysis:

...it (includes) the effects of beat accent, measure, grouping of notes into beats grouping of beats into measures, grouping of measures into phrases, etc. When all the factors are judiciously treated by the performer (with due regularity yet with artistic purpose- an effect of forward movement - and not mere machine like accuracy) we feel and say that the performer possesses 'a sense of rhythm.' They may be free or strict rhythm...(p.592).

The groupings discussed imply a systematic arrangement of the music within a rhythmic structure that is acceptable. Rhythm here is bounded by rules and accentuation of the beats and gives us measure groupings. Departure from the rules results in other rhythmic devices such as syncopation and hemiola (Randel, 1978). The aspect of accent has become the root for teaching meter in Western art music. Other related aspects of rhythm such as tempo are prescribed through the use of other musical terms of which Taylor (1989) uses Italian terms.<sup>1</sup> These are, however, not restricted to rhythm alone but are also prescriptive to the total performance of a musical composition. In discussing harmonic practice in tonal music Gauldin (1997) defines rhythm as follows:

Rhythm deals with the temporal aspect of music, or how time passes in musical compositions. When we listen to a piece, we tend to "keep time" to its rhythm marking off evenly spaced pulses. This regular pulsation, commonly called **beat**, becomes the basis for various other rhythmic durations. The speed of the beat, called **tempo** is customarily indicated in approximate terms usually written in Italian: *Adagio* (slow), *Andante* (moderate), *Allegro* (fast), and so on (p.17).

The notion of evenness of pulses is prevalent in this definition and this predetermines the metrical grouping based on the beat accent usually referred to as the downbeat. Gauldin(1997) continues to discuss metrical groupings in the following terms:

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1. See Taylor, E. (1989). This is set book used in conservatories of the former British colonies. Note values are still referred to with names such as the crotchet for the quarter note and minim for the half note.

Sing or play the melodies “Pop Goes the Weasel” and “America” (“My Country 'Tis of Thee”). You will observe that certain elements in the music tend to group the beats into larger units of equal duration, each of which begins with a stressed pulse. The stronger **downbeat**, preceded by at least one **upbeat** creates a series of regular units that contain the same number of beats. This pattern of stressed and unstressed beats result in a **sense** of metrical grouping or *meter*. Each group called a **measure** or **bar** is indicated in notation by bar lines (p.17).

The notion of accent and downbeat is brought into this further discussion of rhythm. Gauldin (1997) is only but reiterating the common view of rhythm in Western Art music. Study of Western Art music, therefore, encourages one to know and feel the downbeat in order to be able to determine the rhythm of a song. Scholars of Western Art music seem to agree that in many respects rhythm is concerned with the temporal aspect and organisation of time in a given musical composition. This notion is true of all music regardless of ethnicity. Scholes (1970) describes good rhythm in performance as that which meets all the requirements in an accurate manner. The listener must be able to feel the onward movement in terms of rhythm and can at the end be able to make a judgement on the performer in terms of good or bad sense of rhythm also referred to as metronome sense. Scholes (1970) goes on to make an analogy of rhythm and equates it with poetry. In this case Scholes shows the relationship between musical rhythm and poetic rhythm and how the two affect each other. Language, as in song text, is part of rhythm and, therefore, a contributing factor to the learning of a song from any given culture.

The western perspective of rhythm clearly shows how music education in the related cultures tends to transmit rhythmic concepts to children within formal education. Children are taught to feel the downbeat in the music they listen to or perform. The metrical accents become the guiding principle of understanding such concepts as beat, measure (bar) and time signature. Examples 1 to 4 show the perception of meter as taught in western music. The accentuation marks (>) depict the regular two beats in a measure. In this case the measuring unit is the quarter note. The first measure shows the beats in one articulation while the other two show beat division in which the beat consists of two articulations. Thus the regular meter should be felt through the accentuated down beat and this goes for kinds of meter as in the examples.

### Example 1

#### Simple duple meter





rhythm but not every rhythm is meter" (Slonimsky, 1989; p. 409). This is the notion that we tend to forget when we teach music in schools. We want our children to feel the downbeat in order to create meter even in African music. We forget that these children come from strong musical backgrounds with a strong repertoire of traditional songs. Slonimsky's argument reminds us that it is necessary to examine scholarly analysis of African music and see how it can influence our teaching of music.

Ethnomusicological scholarship has concluded that African music can be complex in terms of rhythm. But this general notion is derived from the study of African drumming and from the study of other instruments like the *mbira*. It is not clear whether vocal music is as complex as the related instrumental music. Chernoff (1979), for example, suggests that the complexity of African music in terms of its rhythm is used as part of aesthetic expression. This is also true of Zimbabwean traditional music styles such as *shangara*, *mhande*, *mbira*, *muchongoyo*, *makwingwindo*, *ngororombe* and others. While there is a general view that Zimbabwean music may not be as complex in rhythm as that of West African drums, research has proved the opposite. In his discussion of *mbira* music Berliner (1981) states that aesthetic expressions are found in the cross rhythms of the total performance and Shona people do not view rhythms in terms of the onward movement only, but as a musical expression of daily interaction in ordinary life.<sup>2</sup> Ruth Stone (1988) makes a phenomenological analysis of the concept of time in the epic performance of the Kpelle people of Liberia. For the Kpelle people, time is not only extrinsic phenomena as felt in the music alone but an intrinsic notion that is felt in the actual lives of the people.

The term music is not, in the African context, just the sound patterns, but is viewed holistically within the total performance. While scholars like Dalcroze have advocated for the kinaesthetic development of rhythm in children, dance, in the western world, has been treated as a separate discipline associated with physical education with music only acting as stimuli (Landis & Carder, 1990). Rhythm in African music we should not be viewed in terms of music alone but should also include the related movement and dance. Music and dance are inseparable in many parts of Africa. Certainly in Zimbabwe almost anything based on traditional rhythms has some movement to it. Traditional vocal music that is accompanied by instruments like the *mbira*, drums, rattles or wooden clappers has some movement

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term "cross rhythm" in its simplest form, that is, rhythmic patterns arranged in layers with one pattern being considered as the main beat while others cross it and at the same time cross each other. In *mbira* music we call that *kushaura* and *kutsinhira* with the later crossing the first one.

to it. The movements are either traditional or choreographed.<sup>3</sup> These movements become part of the rhythm of the music and have to be performed by the same people at a given time. Berliner (1981) makes a detailed explanation of the complexities of a musical performance that includes the dance called *shangara* which encompasses *mbira* music. Berliner states that: "The hand clapping patterns can be complex with accents falling between the main beats of the music and different rhythms clapped against each other."(p.195) *Shangara* dance follows the interlocking rhythms that are articulated by the hand and sometimes may follow a cross-rhythm to the clapping. Many scholars of ethnomusicology have echoed the notion of inseparability of music and dance in most African music. Stone (1998), for example, brings in the same issue as she states the following about music and dance in African performance:

African performance stands apart from that in the West because it is clearly part of the fabric of life. Music, as Africans view it is not a thing of beauty to be admired in isolation. Rather, it exists only as woven into the larger textile that also combines games, dance, words, drama and visual art. A.M. Ipoku director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble expressed the idea that dance and music should be so closely connected that one "can see the music and hear the dance" (p. 258)

Of primary significance, is the concept of the timeline which is distinct when African music is compared to Western music. While in Western music meter is the guiding principle in understanding rhythm, Stone (1988) views African music as centred on the timeline. Her study on the Kpelle people's epics performance in Liberia unveiled the timeline as an ostinato pattern upon which other forms of rhythmic creativity are centred. The timeline does not assume the role of the conductor or meter signature as in Western art music but does keep the performance together. It is a basic pattern from which the performers are free to explore within the boundaries of the style. The same timeline is evident in Zimbabwean music and indeed in other parts of Southern Africa. Even in purely vocal music without any clapping there is an underlying timeline implied and that is felt by the performers. Example 5 shows the timeline being articulated by hand clapping in a *mhande* rain making song.

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<sup>3</sup> In this context the term "traditional" is used to denote dance related to musical styles that have existed before colonialism. Examples of these include *shangara*, *mhande*, *dandanda* and many others.

Example 5

Mhondoro Dzinonwa

1  
Dzi - no - nwa m'na Za - mbezi hi. dzi - no - nwa m'na - Sa - ve Dzi - no - nwa m'na - Za -

1  
Mhondo-ro-dzi - no - nwa. mhondo-ro dzi - no - nwa. Mhondo-ro dzi - no - nwa.

1  
Mhondo-ro dzi - no - nwa mhondo-ro dzi - no - nwa. Mhondo-ro-dzi - no - nwa

7  
mbezi hi. dzi - no - nwa m'na - Sa - ve Dzi - no - nwa m'na - Za - mbezi hi. dzi - no - nwa m'na - Sa - ve

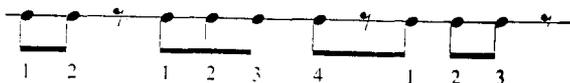
7  
mhondoro dzi - no - nwa Mhond-ro dzi - no - nwa. mhondoro dzi - no - nwa

7  
mhondoro-dzi - no - nwa Mhondoro dzi - no - nwa. mhondoro dzi - no - nwa

Mhande Drum Pattern

Mhande Clapping Timeline.

### Mhande Dance Pattern.

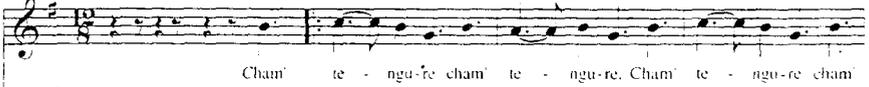


*Mhondoro Dzinonwa* can be perceived in western terms as being a song in simple triple time shown in the main score. The drumming pattern, however, feels more in compound duple time. On the other hand, the African feels everything in terms of the timeline, in this case articulated by the hand clapping. Note that there is no time signature on the drumming pattern and the clapping/timeline.<sup>4</sup> Time signature implies down beat which is not felt in either. Also note the relationship between the timeline, the rest of the parts in the song and the drumming. The dance pattern brings in unexpected feeling by bringing in some different feeling of what should be coming from drums but with rests. Performers are, therefore, free to add any rhythmic patterns in their singing but within the parameters of the timeline. The related basic dance steps follow the timeline and each dancer is free to be creative within the style; therefore, singers, drummers and dancers are all operating within the perspective of the timeline. It should, be understood, therefore, that when people talk of *mhande*, for example, they may be making reference to the dance style, the song genre, or the drumming style. It is from the timeline that Zimbabwean musicians are able to create the movements for contemporary song that Berliner(1981) refers to as *makwaya*. Timelines differ according to the style of the music and, therefore, the choreographed dances will differ accordingly. The following two examples are of different styles from the first song. *Chamutengure* (Example 6) is a *mbira* song superimposed on the *shangara* beat. In Example 7, *Chimbwa Chemusango* is a folk story song without a dance pattern because of the nature of performance and style. Note the differences in the timelines and how they affect style. The *shangara* timeline is articulated by hand clapping known in Shona as *makwa*. Wooden clappers are also used for the same purpose. In the example of the folk story song *Chimbwa Chemusango*, the timeline is more of an underlying feeling. This allows for creativity by individuals resulting in variations of the same song when performed in different Shona speaking regions of Zimbabwe.

4. Note that in the musical examples I do provide the time- signature, not because I believe in African music operating with that, but for the convenience of music writing. Teachers should, therefore, start from the timeline each time they deal with issues of beat and style.

Example 6  
Cham, tengure

Soprano lead



Cham' te - ngu-fe cham' te - ngu-re, Cham' te - ngu-re cham'

Alto Response

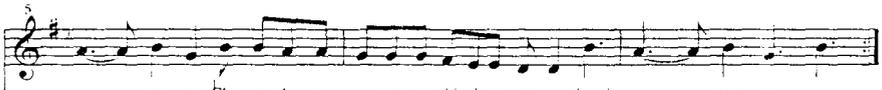


Bass Response:



Cham' te - ngu-re cham'

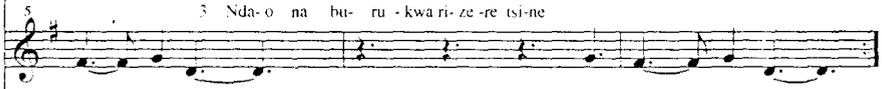
Hiya ha ho - hiya ha ho - , Hiya ha - ho - , hiya ha



5 te - ngu-re. Cha-va cha-mu - te-ngu-re vhi-ri re ngo-ro cham' te - ngu-re

2 Wa - ndi-ti mu - tya-i - ni wa-ndi-o-ne-i

3 Nda-o na bu- ru - kwa ri-ze-re tsi-ne



te ngu re cham' - te - ngu-re -



5 ho - , Hiya ha ho - - - hiya - ha - ho - , Hiya - ha -

Shangara timeline



Dance Pattern (Mbira style)



Example 7

Chimbwa Chemusamgo

1 Lead  
 Mu - ru - me wo - ye mu - ru - me Mu - ru - me

1 Response.  
 Cha-ngo - va chi - mbwa che - mu - sa - ngo Cha-ngo - va chi - mbwa che - mu

7  
 wo - ye mu - ru - me I - ye i - ye i - ye mu - ru - me  
 sa - ngo Cha-ngo - va - chi mbwa che - mu sa - ngo

13  
 I - ye i - ye, i - ye mu - ru - me Ku - si - ya  
 Cha-ngo - va chi - mbwa che - mu sa - ngo Cha-ngo - va chi - mbwa che - mu -

19  
 va - na ne nza - ra Ku - si - ya va - na ne - nza - ra  
 sa - ngo Cha-ngo - va chi - mbwa che - mu - sa - ngo

Chemusango Timeline

A rhythmic timeline consisting of a single staff with eight quarter notes, representing the beat structure of the song.

The examples of Shona songs given in this article are all performed by rote method as opposed to reading from a score. The African performer finds the so called complex rhythm easy because he/ she understands the timeline which determines

the different styles. Formal education however demands for literacy in music. It is in this regard, that we need to take advantage of what our own culture can offer.

### **Implications of the two perspectives**

The discussion so far shows us that there are notable differences and similarities in the way the African and Western worlds of music view rhythmic concepts. Both worlds agree that rhythm is concerned with time and temporal aspects of music, that is, how time passes in a musical performance and the different durations of sound involved. There is general agreement on the notion of time, tempo pulse, and rhythmic patterns. The difference, however, lies on how each of the two worlds conceptualise elements of rhythm either in the performance practice or in the learning process. In the Western world meter is central to the conceptualisation of all rhythmic elements and rhythm literacy is, therefore, taught within that perspective. The accentuated down beat must be felt in the performance for one to be regarded as having a good sense of rhythm. Anything outside meter and the down beat is regarded as asymmetric, syncopation, or rhythmic dissonance, which come as a deliberate compositional ornament and is to be mastered by a talented few. On the other hand, African music performance practice is centred on the timeline. The timeline is central to all rhythmic creativity within any given performance. The interlocking rhythms that become prevalent in the performance make all syncopation, asymmetric features, and dissonance part of the natural phenomena within the music and is understood by all involved in the music making. While western music educators have advocated for the kinaesthetic development of rhythm they still treat dance as a separate discipline in which music is just a stimulus. Africans treat music and dance as one. Since dance articulates rhythm, there is a direct relationship with the timeline.

In view of the rhythmic understanding discussed above, why then do we continue to teach rhythm literacy from the western perspective? As Africans, our children stand on the vantage point in as far as mastering of rhythms is concerned. We should take advantage of that and use music from the cultural repertoire of the child in order to develop rhythm literacy. Children understand concepts faster and more accurately when operating from the music they are familiar with. Teaching rhythm notation from a cultural repertoire of the Zimbabwean child needs a teacher who is prepared to listen to the obvious songs more often and make accurate transcriptions of what goes on in a complete performance of the music and in context.

### Developing rhythm literacy from the cultural repertoire of the child

The complexity of rhythm in a musical style can be used to the advantage of the child. The assumption is that children already know the songs from home and the community around them. They, therefore, learn the song from a vantage point since they have less to struggle with. In cases of the urban child the media has played a part in exposing the child to the different styles of music the country can offer. The teacher therefore starts off with a preparatory programme of teaching songs by rote noting all the rhythmic concepts they wish to develop in the future. Let us take as an example the song *Mhondoro Dzinonwa* referred to earlier on. It is a common song among children with a Shona background. There are many common songs within the same style and these can be taught by rote method as the teacher engages in a preparatory programme for developing rhythm literacy. Using the song *Mhondoro Dzinonwa* in Example 1, I propose a way of extracting content and designing activities for teaching rhythm notation using one song in different lessons. Five lessons can, for example, be designed in relation to musical elements in the song. These musical elements are pulse, timeline, response pattern, drum pattern, and dance pattern. The following is the breakdown of the lessons, their related content and activities.

#### Lesson 1: Pulse

- (a) In this lesson the assumption is that all the elements mentioned above have been taught by rote method in the previous preparatory lessons.
- (b) Note that introduction of any musical concept should move from simple to complex and from known to unknown. In this case the timeline is the most known as children sing the song and clap to it. There is, however, the pulse which forms part of the timeline and is felt in any of our African songs. It is best represented in notation using quarter notes as follows.



- (c) While children are singing the song, let half the class clap to the timeline while the other claps the pulse then show the pulse in notation. Children will continue to experience the timeline aurally while they experience the pulse in visual notation but within the performance context.

**Lesson II: Timeline**

- (a) Bring in the timeline in visual symbols and let children experience it both aurally and visually.



- (b) Continuous practice at this stage will enable children to read both the quarter note (crotchet) and the eighth note (quaver). They visualise the notes and relate them to their performance which seems so natural, yet the pattern is a superimposed syncopation.

**Lesson III: Response Pattern**

- (a) The song pattern is the next to come. In this case one has to be careful as to which part of the song pattern to bring in next. I suggest the following pattern which comes from the response part of the example we are using.



- (b) This pattern includes a new note, that is, the half note (minim) while providing children with a revision of the quarter note and the eighth note. At the same time children visualise what they are already singing.
- (c) The eighth notes are grouped in twos, a grouping common in simple time whether in triple duple or quadruple. Here the quarter note rest (crotchet rest) becomes the logical rest to introduce since children already know the equivalent note value.

**Lesson IV: Drum pattern**

- (a) Children should then take turns in playing the basic drum pattern. The whole class can also be asked to clap to this drum pattern.
- (b) Here we can see note grouping in threes and this becomes the new concept as children are exposed to the visual symbols. This grouping is common in compound time whether duple triple or quadruple.



**Lesson V: Dance Pattern**

(a) Finally, children are exposed to the dance pattern, that is, using visual symbols. In this case children already know the notes. The new concept that is coming in is the eighth note rest (quaver rest). They have experienced it through dance but are seeing the visual symbol for the first time.



(b) Teachers should slow down the dance pattern in order for children to feel the rest. Note the developmental sequence in the content and activities, all emanating from one song that children already know.

In all the lessons singing is the fundamental activity which should go on all the time. Also note that content comes from all angles of the song performance, that is the voice, the instruments, body percussion and dance movement. Thus the Kodaly, Orff and Dalcroze theories are put into play using one song, constituting an eclectic approach to music teaching (Landis & Carter, 1990).

**Conclusion**

All music can be felt in terms of time but not all music is metered. The notion of the downbeat is more prevalent in western music. Teaching musical concepts from the "musical mother tongue" has been proven to be a worthwhile pedagogical approach (Choksy, 1988; p. 4). The timeline is a common feature in African music and Zimbabwean music is no exception. We should, therefore, strive to develop our music education within the context of our musical culture. Music of other cultures may come in at a later stage, as the child becomes more mature and more conversant in other language systems such as English. Let us not forget that music is an element of culture. Methods and approaches to teaching it should take cognisance of the learner's culture.

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