Faith and Music: A Personal Exploration of the Implication of Religious Faith in Music Therapy, within an Intercultural, Group Music-Making Context

Bethan Lee Shrubsole

Abstract

In July 2008 Music for Peaceful Minds (MPM), a peripatetic music therapy service in post-conflict northern Uganda, was established. To date, MPM serves four schools and two orphanages with a specially-trained peripatetic Ugandan music counsellor. Weekly music therapy groups are run, each consisting of six children, referred by orphanage or school staff. The mixed- and single sex- groups run for a term (10-12 weeks). They are split into age ranges of 4-11 and 12-18.

This is a clinical discussion drawing on my personal experience as a music therapist in Uganda in 2008. It is not intended to be a theoretical or research paper and as such does not contain a thorough literature review. I will be considering various religious aspects of an English therapist working in northern Uganda, focusing on the music that was made in sessions. I will discuss the questions of how important it is for a therapist to have a shared culture, faith or musical background with her clients, and how a language barrier can affect the therapy.

Keywords: conflict, culture, religion, music, therapy, post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma.

Bethan Lee Shrubsole has been interested in how music therapy can help people affected by war and conflict since she visited Kosovo in 2000. Her interest led her to northern Uganda where she saw a need for rehabilitative therapy for whole communities traumatised by war. She trained as a music therapist at Anglia Ruskin University, graduating in 2008. In July 2008 she founded the community-based organisation *Music for Peaceful Minds*, which has offered music therapy to over two hundred children in mainstream and special needs schools and orphanages in Gulu, northern Uganda.

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Introduction

Music for Peaceful Minds (MPM) began in 2008 when I went to Uganda to set up a peripatetic music therapy service. It ran for eight months with two western music therapists (myself and a Dutch therapist) and to date is being run by a specially trained Ugandan music counsellor. Through drawing on my personal experience, I will look back at the issues raised by having a western music therapist running groups in a different culture (the northern Acholi and Langi tribes), especially at how these issues came about in the music made together.

I begin by reviewing the background of Uganda including its cultures and religions, along with a summary of my personal background and information about the client groups involved. I then include an outline showing what happened in the music therapy groups so the reader can envisage the setting for discussing how I, as an outsider, might have had some sway on what was brought along by the children and how both clients and therapists influenced the proceedings. Finally, the cultural and religious points of interest in the music that was made in groups will be explored, and a

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conclusion follows of how this impacted on me as a therapist.

Context

Pre-colonial Uganda consisted of Bantu- Nilotic- and Sudanic-speaking migrant tribes. The southern Buganda tribe was the largest and was used by the British to subjugate the entire country during the colonial period. The British introduced western medicine, education, law, administration and government (Ofcansky 1996). Some Ugandans supported British rule and some opposed it. There are 32 languages used in Uganda, reflecting the number of tribes. English is the official national language but less than 30% of the population understand it (Ofcansky 1996). With MPM, I ran groups in English as a lot of the older children knew enough to communicate and I knew enough Acholi to fill in the gaps! On important occasions such as for evaluations, a translator was used.

European missionary activity began in 1877. Although wary of the new religion at first, today most of Uganda's population are active Christians and churches are thriving and vibrant all over the country. Unlike the UK which is now predominantly secular, Ugandans practise Christianity openly and enthusiastically. Alongside traditional Catholic and Protestant churches the Pentecostal movement is growing rapidly (Jenkins 2007).

Following independence in 1962, Uganda was wracked by civil wars and oppressive governments, notably that of Idi Amin in the 1970s. Later, Museveni's armed National Resistance Movement took control of the government and Museveni became president in 1986. Although not perfect by any means, he has turned the country around and provided much needed stability and growth.

Unfortunately, another rebel group was emerging. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been attempting to overthrow the government since around 1986 and has done this by wreaking havoc on the country, particularly the Acholi tribe in the north. The army uses destruction, rape, abduction, mutilation and fear as its weapons. Tens of thousands of children have been abducted to fight as soldiers, even being forced to commit atrocities on their own family members. The boys are abducted for use as soldiers and the girls used as wives for soldiers who perform well. Most of the population fled from their villages to take refuge in Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps for safety, which in turn were attacked by the LRA. Terror and fear have been their way of life for over two decades. In 2006 a truce was agreed between the LRA and the Ugandan government. However, the peace process fell through when the rebel leader, Joseph Kony, failed to show up to sign the treaty in 2008. Although Uganda is now enjoying a certain amount of peace and is returning to some degree of normality, the rebels continue to fight in neighbouring south Sudan, DR Congo and the Central African Republic.

After more than two decades of suffering fear and conflict, a huge percentage of the population in the north are now experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other traumatic symptoms. Flashbacks and nightmares are common amongst the population and many find it too difficult to return to their villages even though it is now considered safe to do so (Oxfam 2008).

Personal background

I was born in Kent and lived in Hertfordshire, raised in the Christian faith. I consider it was quite a sheltered life, having seen how people around the world live. My maternal grandparents were raised in India during the Raj so I have always had some interest in other countries and cultures.

I was taught classical piano and clarinet from age 7 but was far more interested in the music that my parents listened to, which included gospel music from Africa and South America. The lush African harmonies inspired my interest in ethnomusicology and a desire to hear music from all over the globe.

My Christian upbringing has remained with me and I have a strong Christian faith. This has a bearing on my music-making, since I enjoy singing Christian songs and discovering not only the secular but also the religious traditions of different countries. I started a Gospel choir in 2003 in which we sang some traditional Gospel songs, but a vast amount of our repertoire was made up of African music, especially songs that I had transcribed in Uganda.

I travelled extensively in my late teens and early twenties, and did voluntary work in Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Uganda.

I believe that making music is an innate urge that most humans have in their souls, and have had throughout history. I am therefore passionate as a Christian music therapist that people should be facilitated in making music as a form of emotional and spiritual healing.

After being in Uganda in 2004 as an aid worker in IDP camps, I was inspired by a rehabilitation centre for ex-child soldiers to return to England and train as a music therapist (which I did at Anglia Ruskin University). I then returned to Uganda to start MPM in Gulu, northern Uganda in July 2008. It was here I began to discover the style of music therapy I wanted to practise. Despite being predominantly analytically trained, my belief is that, as a music therapist, I can trust the musical group process to work within individuals. If I was

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able to comment on or understand what was being said, maybe I would have developed a different style. However, in Uganda, where the language barrier restricted my ability to understand everything that was going on verbally around the music, I trusted the process of group music-making to be the means of change within the individuals.

Music for Peaceful Minds (MPM) – The project

When running groups in Uganda, sessions always begin with one of two hello songs. For the younger children there is a simple A-B-A-C structured song using the English work 'hello' and the Acholi word "Kopengo" used for "how are you?". For the teenagers, a rap brought by the Dutch volunteer, Jantina Bijpost, is used. It is mostly in English but uses the 'Kopengo' greeting in Acholi. Both songs leave spaces for names.

I found that a drum warm-up game was useful for setting the scene of the session with the added bonus that it could lead in so many different directions. The therapist taps the drum once, leaving no indication of what should happen next. Without exception, a group member always follows and taps the drum himself. Other members follow until the drum is being pounded by all hands at random moments! This game invariably takes a variety of twists and turns including moving places as you play, swapping places with friends, directing friends to move around or incorporating actions and songs. The rest of the session either goes down an improvised route where the group members bring ideas and maintain the session themselves, or the therapist will introduce an activity if necessary and desired.

Just before singing a goodbye song in English, (the Acholi also use the word 'bye'), the therapist will either encourage a short discussion about what happened in the group, or introduce a short directed warm-down activity if necessary, to bring the session to a close.

Music for Peaceful Minds started in SOS children's home, Gulu, with four groups of six children per week. The children were split into same-sex groups of ages 5-11 and teenagers. The reason for splitting the sexes was because as a newly-arrived, and therefore potentially suspicious, volunteer, I wanted to fit in with Ugandan society, which often segregates girls and boys. That is also why it was agreed to run sessions in an open-sided tent for the first ten weeks!

After only a month or two, contacts started asking for music therapy in their institutions. With my volunteer, Jantina, I began running sessions in a boarding primary school for war-affected children. These children were referred by an American art therapist as they were all former child-soldiers or abductees.

A month before leaving Uganda, Jantina and I began working in one of two special needs units in the town. This work consisted of one class music group and three small groups of six children aged 7 plus.

At this moment, MPM's Ugandan music counsellor, Betty Acen, is running music counselling in these schools plus two other primary schools with year six students aged 12-18. She has begun to mix the sexes of the groups, which has mixed benefits. The children can learn to appreciate the opposite sex rather than sticking to any stereotypes of gender, but they are also slightly more inhibited and need more encouragement to share their feelings or experiences.

The instruments used in music therapy groups are mostly local, handcrafted by an Acholi craftsman. The familiarity of the instruments is useful to help the children to know what to do with them and not have a barrier to playing music. However, when small bells and children's metallophones from the UK were introduced, these were received with equal zeal and excitement because of their colours and sounds. Therefore, using mostly local instruments with a small selection of western children's instruments proved to be a good way of working. The benefits of using local instruments also include the fact that when they get broken (which happens frequently!) the instruments are more easily and cheaply replaced which makes the program sustainable.

Aims of the project

In the beginning, I had envisaged that the aims of MPM's music therapy groups would be focused on discussing past experiences, almost like a desensitisation program or implosive therapy (Lyons 1989). However, due to language barriers that restricted too much discussion or instruction, and the fact that music is immediate and memorable, the aims became more about the present and thinking about the future. These aims were also determined by the fact that an art therapist was working in the same school. As his work brought about a lot of past memories through the art exercises he led, it made sense for MPM to not dwell on the past as this would not be beneficial for the children. So the aims that came about were dictated, in a way, by the children themselves. It became apparent that these were the things they most needed:

- strengthen group identity (antidote to isolation);
- strengthen self-identity (within a group setting);
- nurture creativity and offer a space for experimentation, i.e. learning to play;
- encourage positive outlook on future;
- enhance leadership skills;

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- encourage working together;
- explore different emotions in a safe space.

Religious aspects of music

Often, when asked "what do you want to do in the group today?" the children would say "sing". When asked what they would like to sing, more often than not a Christian song was requested. In the UK, it is often felt that touching upon religion has become a taboo subject that cannot be discussed without care and trepidation in case anyone takes offence. However, in Uganda it is totally the opposite and God is on the tips of everyone's tongues. It takes a little while to get used to this openness and I had to practise not stiffening every time a Christian song was sung.

Once I had settled into the fact that it was 'safe' to be working with faith in the sessions, I realised that what the songs were teaching the children was a message of hope; a release from daily worries and forgiveness for themselves and others. They were using their faith as part of their healing. The upbeat Christian songs seemed to be a way of expressing their hopes and faith in the future. Although they knew local and national pop songs and did bring other songs to the group, Christian songs dominated the majority of the sessions.

As a Christian I understood perfectly how the message of hope and forgiveness can help to heal the children. Thanks to international Christian songwriters I was also familiar with a lot of the songs that the children sang. As a music therapist, I understood how the songs themselves and the improvisation that came out of them helped to heal the children as they socialised together and became creative and expressive people. My colleague, Jantina, is not a Christian and I asked her opinion on how she felt about not being able to share this common theme of the sessions. Was this a part of the children that she was not able to share? She told me that she did not think it made much difference on the surface since she could still join in with the music-making. But it led me to thinking about a therapist's relationship with her clients: Is it important to retain the traditional therapist blank screen, or is it okay to be a bit more open with clients? I found that being a foreigner opened me up to all sorts of inquisitiveness from the local people. I was living amongst the people I worked with and met them regularly on the street. It was not always possible to be a closed book when my clients knew which restaurant I ate my *goat and beans* at, who my friends were, where I lived (and the rent I paid) and which church I worshipped at. It was for this reason I decided that a 'blank screen' was pointless so I showed a little more of myself in sessions than I would when working in the UK. I think therefore that because the children knew a bit about this foreigner (including the important aspect of a shared faith) they were more trusting and open with me. I also hoped that by openly sharing with the children what they already knew about me that this would quell any more curiosity in other areas of my life.

With a few of the groups we suggested that the children might like to write a song to express what they had been discussing in recent weeks. Composing music was difficult and time-consuming. The language was a barrier to composing words because although the children wrote in Acholi, they had difficulty understanding what we were suggesting for them to do in the first place. In order to present song-writing as a less daunting task, we offered a harmonic or rhythmic framework that the children could simply add words and a tune to. With one group of teenage girls who were particularly fluent in English, we offered them a Zimbabwean pop tune that would have had a familiar lilt to it. We played them the chord sequence a few times and encouraged them to start writing the words on a theme they had chosen inspired by recent events: separation and loss – see example 1. They began with what seemed like a very sad and negative line. One girl began by saying 'lit' (pain) should be the title. The other girls offered the next few lines and they manipulated them to fit into a form that they were happy with. The original reference was to Jantina and I leaving Uganda and the groups' sessions ending. However, upon discussion we also related the subject of the song to people in the children's pasts that had left abruptly, without being able to say goodbye. Separation was particularly difficult for this group since all of them had been abductees and had experienced the sudden loss of many people and ways of life. One girl's sister died during this period but she could not afford to go to the burial. We mourned with her as a group and offered her encouragement during this grieving period.

The rest of the song focuses on the faith the children have that they will see their deceased loved ones again and that those who leave them to go to another town or country will come back and visit or at least remember the children. The final line is about letting go of people and saying a healthy goodbye and refers not only to Jantina and I, but to their lost loved ones and current friends, since they were all leaving school that year. To the children, without their faith in God and hope in the future, this song might seem negative, with only a vague plea that the leaving person might come back and visit. However, with their faith in God they can say goodbye with more optimism that they and their loved ones will be okay.

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Even though this song was composed with only one group, a week after this song-writing session, I returned to the school to hear a whole class of 40 children singing the song! The original group had taken such ownership of the song that it will remain with them to help them and their friends through difficult times in the future.

Lit, lit, lit
Lit, lit, lit ojonewekowa Kara wunucito, dwo limo wa Rubangabenekonyowuudwogoilimowa Rubangabenekonywuwotmaber
English translation:
Pain, pain, pain
Oh it's painful that you leave us Even if you go, please come back and visit May God bless you, please come back and visit May God give you a safe journey

Table 1: Example of song

Other methods of psychological care in Uganda

Christianity is not the only belief system that needs consideration when working in Uganda. There are traditional tribal beliefs and practices that often merge with other beliefs, and the boundaries of religions are not always clearly defined. The table presented here (see table 2) shows how Ugandan counsellors are taught to divide up psychological problems whilst taking into account traditional beliefs and practices. If the problem is a *natural negative life event*, as in column one, then the counsellor is taught to do the things in that column, for example; providing emotional support and reassurance, encouraging expression, and engaging in group activities. This is most similar to counselling in the UK.

However, if the psychological problem is deemed to be an *outcome of a person's actions or omission of actions*, the counsellor is taught to encourage the person to fulfil personal obligations towards clan spirits, such as customary rituals or sacrifices. Tribal spiritual healers can be sought and advice from them should be taken. Finally in this column, a participation in drama is recommended, most probably with other members of the tribe. This column is often recommended for children who have carried out atrocities as child soldiers, since it is believed that the spirits of the people they killed are still around and are the ones causing the psychological problems because they were not buried properly or with the correct rituals. In rural areas, ex-child soldiers suffering from psychological problems are encouraged to take this route for healing.

Natural negative life events	Outcome of personal actions and omissions	The result of actions by one's enemies
Provide emotional support, encourage expression of grief over loss, e.g. mourning rituals	Fulfil personal obligations and responsibilities to the family and clan spirits	Cast out evil spirits
Give supportive company; do not leave alone	Performance of customary rituals	Sacrifice animal prescribed by the evil spirits
Reassure the person, e.g. that they are not alone and it was not their fault	Offer sacrifice to ancestral spirits	Plant medicinal products to keep evil spirits away
Engage in group activities	General behaviour conforming to prescription made by healer	Wearing of medicinal products to protect health against the evil
Give material assistance	Participation in drama (to encourage release of emotional tension)	Participation in drama (to encourage release of emotional tension)

Table 2: Methods of care for psychological problems in Ugandan healthcare (Ovuga 2006)

The final column suggests possible healing remedies for people suffering psychological problems due to *actions of their enemies*. A spiritual healer needs to be sought so that they can cast out evil spirits, or sacrifice an animal. Medicinal products should be worn or planted, and, rather surprisingly, participation in a drama is recommended again!

As a foreign therapist trying to understand and respect local cultures I respected any child's decision to take any of the recommendations in the second or third columns even if I did not believe them myself. If this was the case, I would not have dissuaded them from getting in touch with someone more able to help them in these different pathways.

Cultural aspects of music

The musical content of each session depended on the group but usually consisted of an improvised fusion of western-style music, Ugandan pop-music and Acholi traditional-style music. For example the hello/goodbye song was composed by me but the improvised game-songs were made up in the moment and created a fusion of the complex African rhythms found in traditional songs and more simple 4/4 rhythms and harmonies from the West.

Traditional cultural songs about warriors and finding wives existed but were not often used in music therapy, only in the traditional dance classes at school. In music therapy sessions it seemed that

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the children preferred to bring songs which reflected the Christian aspect of their culture rather than the traditional. This could be for a number of reasons; perhaps because as a white person I was automatically viewed as both a Christian and someone they need to impress, or because music therapy groups were not seen as part of the curriculum whereas traditional dance was. Maybe the words of hope and salvation in the Christian songs provided the children with inspiration and they wanted to share this with the group, or simply they just liked the songs?

Finally, on some occasions the children brought 'playground' games and songs to the session and the occasional football chants when it was match day.

The groups that I worked with in Uganda were far more likely to move than groups in the UK. By this I mean standing up, moving places, dancing or doing action games. Having sung a lot with the children in IDP camps, I noticed that it was very difficult to get them to stay still when singing. For the Acholi culture, singing involves moving. Indeed, there is no word in Acholi that means just 'music' but the word for singing intrinsically includes dancing, playing instruments and so on. Usually, the warm-up drum game brought about movement. It came naturally to the children and they are not afraid of getting up, joining in and expressing themselves vocally as well as physically. Most of the dancing involved the children moving in circles, which is derived from the traditional dances that are mostly danced in lines or circles.

Ugandans live their lives outside. There is little privacy; meetings are often held under mango trees, people are always hanging around and interested in what is going on. When we started our sessions at SOS we met in an open-sided tent, the only space available at the time, where we had a 'mother' on hand to shoo away the crowds of children to maintain some sort of privacy. There is an irony that whilst trying to keep the boundaries of our current group safe we were watching the mothers chase away the 94 other children with a stick! The boundaries we managed were very different to the way we might approach them in the UK. We had to cope with the occasional intruder partly because it happened so often that we would never get on with the session if we kept stopping to shoo them away and partly because if it rained it was necessary for all the children to get under cover! During one session with a group of teenage girls, stormy rain started coming into the tent so we moved to the next-door tent that offered better cover. Just as we were getting going again, the rain became so heavy that a group of boys decided to join us. Although it looked to an outsider like utter chaos, we were still able to maintain a feeling of membership and boundary simply because we had been together for ten weeks and our relationship as a group was fairly well cemented.

I mentioned earlier that the children brought along pre-composed songs such as children's songs, football chants and Christian songs. These often provided a framework for the sessions, helping the children to be creative and improvise. For example one pre-composed song would fade out and lead to a section of free improvisation (in this case, where no one is designated as 'in charge' and ideas are taken up by group members without prior arrangement or discussion). Often a new pre-composed song would arise, sometimes in a different guise. This was a very useful way of working with these children not only because many of them lacked creativity due to their pasts, but also because the way of rote-learning at school did not leave the children with very much scope for creativity or imagination. The pre-composed songs enable the children to improvise other aspects of music and play while the familiar structure of the song acts as a container.

Exploring emotions

In Acholi, the greeting used most often is "kopengo", meaning literally "what is there?" and the answer is always "kope", literally "there is nothing". I understand that greetings are often meaningless in their literal sense (like the English "alright?") but this seems particularly stark in its coldness.

This says a lot about the way that people talk to each other in Uganda. It seemed to me that people do not easily open up to their friends and they always expect people to get on with their lot rather than talk about it excessively. Perhaps people do not share their emotions with each other because so many of them are sharing the same war traumas and this risks re-traumatisation. They do not want to seem as though they are moaning about something when the person they are sharing with may have suffered much worse.

However, in order that the children I worked with felt able to share feelings amongst themselves in a controlled and safe environment where any re-traumatisation could be dealt with in the group, I led some emotion-exploration games in the music therapy groups. It worked particularly well with a group of young teenage boys. I first offered them a drum that they were encouraged to beat in a variety of emotions. For example they could beat very fast and say that they were excited, or very lethargically to show that they were tired or sad. After passing the drum around in this manner, we then chose one emotion at a time and acted it and played it on instruments as a group. The boys found this really

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good fun and were not shy in acting out and playing even the more vulnerable emotions such as fear or sadness. The benefit of doing this was that after we had finished acting out the emotion, we came together and discussed times when we had felt that emotion. Apart from some of the more obvious and light-hearted answers such as "I am happy when I am playing football" we found that the boys were willing to share their fear of being married ("I am scared when someone wants to marry me" one boy stated), their sadness at losing their mothers (the boys were orphans) and other emotions relating to friendships that they valued and achievements that they were proud of. Sharing their emotions was quite contrary to how they had been brought up in the Ugandan culture, but they all expressed pleasure at being able to take the time to share what was going on in their emotional lives.

The government has understood how important it is for the traumatised people in the north to take part in counselling and there are a large number of counselling courses and government books available to teachers, social workers and child-carers. Most schools have a member of staff and a room allocated to counselling the children, and mothers at children's homes are encouraged to have regular 1:1 time with their children. Counselling in Uganda takes into account both modern methods and traditional culture and books about counselling usually include a section about this, as table 2 demonstrates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found that there are, obviously, important differences in the musical and religious cultures of my country and theirs: The English used in Uganda is like learning to speak a foreign language because of the different dialect; the way of making music is considerably different to the 'sit down and listen' culture that we have in concert halls. But there are similarities too. We have some shared aspects of pop music – the guitar is common in pop songs of the UK and Uganda and chord structures are often the same I IV V chords as we are used to. The traditional music is the most different but it is possible to get a grip on it and study the musical features in order to use them in the sessions. The roots of faith are the same although the current practice of Christianity in the UK today is different to the way faith is expressed in Uganda. Once I had an idea of these similarities and differences, I could arm myself with local knowledge of the culture and learn how to play music in the local way, and get on with leading the group, relishing the fusion of sound that came about.

With groups consisting of a British woman, a Dutch woman and children from Acholi and Langi tribes, the music and activity that was made in the groups was not only a mix of African meets European, it was more than that. It was a fusion of western classical, western pop, Ugandan pop, Acholi traditional, songs learned in captivity, English style of dancing and many different African styles of dancing. As a therapist working in a foreign culture, I found that as long as I took into account the local ways of making music, there was nothing wrong with adding a bit of myself into the mix to add to the fusion. As long as the music retained some sense of familiarity for the children, it was exciting and fresh for them to make a new mix that symbolised in some way the new direction that their lives were taking.

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