

Changing our Tune: Can music help tackle environmental challenges?

One of the biggest problems facing our modern internet driven age at this moment is climate change. As we travel on the train tracks of rapid advancement and development, there is a growing realisation that our destination is beginning to look frighteningly bleak. Our world is losing its symbiotic connection with nature and needs quick change to bounce back from the decades of damage. What if music could play a role in reconnecting us with our natural environments, therefore encouraging us to value and protect them more? Alan Merriam's 3-part model of musical analysis (1964) provides a useful start point in analysing cultural musicking behaviours and how they interact with nature. Merriam explains that the analysis of music cultures can be broken down into 3 parts: ideas, behaviours, and sound. In this essay I will explore, using Alan Merriam's model, emic positions of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea and the Maori of New Zealand and how, from an etic position, we can learn lessons surrounding environmental connection from their musicking practises.

The Kaluli people have an extremely unique musicking culture which is completely reliant on their external environment. It is described by Feld as an 'acoustemology,' meaning 'local conditions of acoustic sensation, knowledge and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place resounding in Bosavi' (1996, p. 91). The Kaluli people's musicking is their way of 'being' in the world. They see no separation between themselves, the environment and the natural sounds that surround them. This is a multifaceted cultural understanding and there are practical aspects to this level of sound embedment as well as deep cultural beliefs that are entwined with their acoustemology, which includes the recognition of birdsong as an extension of human spirits.

The practical aspect of Kaluli acoustemology comes into play with the harvesting of Sago from native Sago trees in the jungle that they live within (Schieffelin, 2015, p. 179). The women, while taking part in the working behaviours, sing songs along with the beat of their work. It is a cultural idea within the Kaluli that the sago will taste better if the songs are sung during production. This belief may stem from their natural embedment in their sonic surroundings, as the songs usually incorporate the sounds of their environment. From an emic perspective, they are taking part in the act working and singing while also reflecting on those who came before them and the spirits that live within their environment. As an etic listener

we can never fully appreciate the historical spirituality that lives amongst the sounds of the Kaluli, however what we can take away is that a deeper connection with the environment around us can reap rewards.

Birdsong has distinctive nostalgic and mournful roots in Kaluli culture. There is an overall belief that the birds are the spirits of people who have passed on and that the songs they sing come from a variety of contexts such as warning, lamenting or guidance. While living with and studying the Kaluli, Feld recounts being told by a Kaluli tribesman that ‘To you they are birds – to me they are voices in the forest’ (2012, p. 45). This is a direct exposure of the idealistic differences between emic and etic views on Kaluli (and other) cultures. To understand the emic perspective better Feld had to ‘approach Kaluli feelings about birds as a complex and many-layered cultural configuration’ (Feld, 2012, p. 45). One specific relationship between birdsong and Kaluli spirits is the Muni bird. It is believed amongst Kaluli culture that the Muni bird is the voice of a young boy who, whilst fishing in the jungle with his sister, transformed into a bird and flew away. The Muni bird’s song is said to be the voice of this boy, calling out to his lost sister through the trees. The melody of this birdsong also infiltrates the songs they sing, as if equating birds and humans onto the same plane. The Muni bird melody is commonly imitated in the weeping songs of the Kaluli (Feld, 2012, p. 20). This sonic relationship between humans, nature, memory, and folklore is incredibly dynamic and very unique. It is a strong part of Kaluli acoustemology. Those involved from an emic perspective do so without effort as it is a natural and normal part of their discourse however for etic viewpoints, this is a new concept to grasp. It is so far away from the methodical and scientific approach to nature and animals that most Western cultures have. Furthermore, for etic listeners a great appreciation can be found for the beautiful and oddly haunting concept of birdsong being the voices of those who has passed before us.

The Maori relationship with music and environment is deeply intertwined with legends and cultural beliefs that are passed down generationally through various art forms. ‘According to Maori mythology, music called the world into creation’ (Clements, 2014, p. 17). The Maori, unlike the Kaluli, see humans and music as separate entities. Maori culture ‘relied entirely on spoken language and oral traditions, as a consequence of which they also valued song composition’ (Meijl, 2021, p. 177). Maori legends of creation are a huge part of their culture. They believe that the earth and sky were once joined together in darkness and their children decided to separate their parents in order to let light in. After their separation the children

became gods of the environment, and so the sea and forests were formed (Te ahukaramū, 2005). This traditional behaviour of telling stories and ideologies through song is one that can be appreciated from both emic and etic positions, however under different circumstances. The ideas behind the melody will be much more culturally embedded for emic participants and also hold a stronger emotional context as it is their culture and heritage. As an etic listener appreciation can be found for the cultural stories shared as well as appreciation of the music sound context. However, the in depth historical and emotional understanding will never be as strong as it is from the emic perspective.

The Maori create instruments for their musicking practises. The objects of Maori musicking are physical, handcrafted instruments that act as a through point for human connection with the natural forces. They are always made from natural resources such as wood, shells, stone, and bone. This helps to draw a connection between the natural world and musicking world which adds another dimension to Maori culture. The physical act of blowing through an instrument, for example a pūtātara made from shell and wood, is symbolic of connecting the human breath and spirit with natural forces that the Maori believe in (Flintoff, 2004, pg. 50). As an emic participant in this musicking, there will be a deep connection with the mythology of their people and a sense of cultural resonance that cannot be understood from an etic perspective. Etic listeners can appreciate however, the aesthetic beauty of these instruments as well as the sonic beauty.

The question then must be raised of world music ethics, when thinking about what etic listeners can take away from these unique musicking cultures. Without the cultural or historical background that comes from emic musicking, we will never fully understand their culture. Bruno Nettl explores this, stating that while studying in India his informants from other cultures ‘wanted to be treated like human beings [...] Beyond this they wanted their material to be used in accordance with their own ideas. [...] They wanted to be sure that, in teaching, I would treat their music as something integral to their culture’ (2015, p.164). We need to develop and create our own ways of reconnecting with nature. This can be achieved by studying and appreciating other musicking habits of cultures that are deeply in tune with their surroundings.

In conclusion, we can learn many lessons from both the Kaluli and Maori musicking experiences surrounding environmental connection and appreciation. Firstly, from the Kaluli

we can learn how to be both emotionally and spiritually embedded in our surroundings as well as gaining an awareness of our own local acoustemology. They have an admirable depth of connection with their environment that would be difficult to achieve in Western cultures today. The Kaluli also value music in production of food and believe that if the sound and intentions of the workers are good, so too will the produce be good. From this, etic listeners can take a sense of treating the environment with kindness, as it will then return that kindness to you. The Maori use of music to pass down folklore and moral tales can be appreciated by etic participants, and it also features in many other cultures. From Maori musicking, with its definitive category of music being separate from the human spirit, we can learn about the natural forces in our world and how using resources from our environment can in turn bring us closer to these forces. By experiencing and learning about other cultures and their musicking within environments from emic positions, as etic participants we can then in turn begin to appreciate our own environments and acoustemologies through our own means and methods.

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