

Epistemological interfaces of Ethnomusicology: Understanding human existence

Interfaces epistemológicas da Etnomusicologia: Compreendendo a Existência Humana

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Resumo: This paper invites ethnomusicologists to adventure outside boundaries suggested in descriptive definitions of their predecessors and formulate an inclusive definition that asserts the new ethnomusicological praxis according to the new challenges. The inclusive definition has to articulate, among other, the intended study goal overlooked in the past.

Keywords: Ethnomusicology; Epistemology; Ethnomusicological praxis; Theoretical models.

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Resumo: Este artigo convida os etnomusicólogos a aventurarem-se além das fronteiras sugeridas pelas definições descritivas de seus predecessores e a formularem uma definição inclusiva que afirme a nova práxis etnomusicológica diante dos desafios atuais. A definição inclusiva deve articular, entre outros aspectos, o objetivo de estudo pretendido que foi negligenciado no passado.

Palavras-chave: Etnomusicologia; Epistemologia; Práxis etnomusicológica; Modelos teóricos.

The term epistemology is defined in Merriam Webster Dictionary as “the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity¹”. The Oxford Languages Dictionary expands this definition beyond scope and validity to include methods². Whereas in other fields these three crossing points of epistemology (knowledge, methods, scope) may have been handled separately, in ethnomusicological inquiry, however, they have to be applied as an integrated total to highlight their zone of convergence and interaction, as well as their intended chronologic order.

If the first of these aspects seeks to know “**What?**” is the true identity of ethnomusicology and what it does, the second, “**Methods**”, inquires “**How**” ethnomusicological tasks are carried out. Last but not least, the third, “**Scope**”, ponders on the comprehensiveness of the research with its conclusive question “**Why**” that probes into the *raison d’être* (purpose, goal) of ethnomusicology as a field of investigation. The present paper calls for ethnomusicologists to re-examine their perception of this field of study through a wide-angle lens and compare them with those from different periods of the evolution. Elsewhere I demonstrate challenges of diverse opinions that animate debates in academic circles about the truth in ethnomusicology (Mukuna, 2008, p. 12-23), and compel scholars to recognize the importance of understanding the epistemological basis for their constructed research models (Fetterman, 2010).

The present paper contains a series of thought-provoking recommendations grounded in lessons obtained from such masters as Charles Seeger (1886-1979), Fernando Augusto Albuquerque Mourão (1934-2018), Ki Mantle Hood (1918-2005), J. H. Kwabena Nketia (1921-2019), Alan P. Merriam (1923-1980), and in the writings of such thinkers as Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969), Maurice Halbach (1877-1945), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), Franz Boas (1858-1942), Melville Herskovits (1895-1963), to cite these in the Humanities in general and in ethnomusicology in particular.

There is an urgent need for the actualization of past definitions of ethnomusicology on the grounds of current research challenges. A well-structured definition of

¹ Disponível em: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epistemology>. Acesso em 02 de ago. de 2024.

² The same source asserts that the term is derived from the Greek *epistēmē* (“knowledge”) and *logos* (“reason”), and accordingly the field is sometimes referred to as the theory of knowledge. Disponível em: <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-l-d&q=epistemology+definition>. Acesso em 20 de jul. de 2022.

ethnomusicology requires a phenomenologically oriented concept of underlining theory or model, whether it is an explicit anthropological, ethnographical or an implicit personal model about how things ought to work. Selected theory and/or model should assist ethnomusicologists to identify the research problem and how to tackle it (Fetterman, 2010, p. 5). The proposed ideal definition of ethnomusicology, therefore, has to be epistemologically balanced and capable to articulate the intended *raison d'être* (purpose, goal). While some scholars might share the significance of this point of view, others might question right out its validity. To those in the latter category, let us agree to disagree.

“What” is Ethnomusicology?

The comprehension of the nature of ethnomusicology requires, first and foremost, to accept that music of all kind is the subject of study in the field of ethnomusicology (Hood, 1971, p. 3). Second, understand the make-up and the objectives of branches of social studies and the humanities. Although modes of inquiry in these two disciplines are divergent, they converge on “human being” as their subject of study. Whereas in social sciences, the human being is studied in the network of social interaction, in the humanities, on the other hand, human is examined with the objective to address the philosophic concern about what makes human a human³. In the latter discipline, significant questions are raised about what constitutes the truth, objectivity, and rationality of the human existence.

Neither of the two fields alone can provide a comprehensive knowledge to satisfy the concern of humanness without the contribution of the other. Therefore, as a scientific branch of study prescribed within the goal of these two fields, the research in ethnomusicology has to reconcile its theoretical model to the purpose of these sister fields.

On the basis of this empirical logic, ethnomusicologists have to be reminded that their field of study has remained an explicitly comparative method for ethnographic study of folksongs and non-Western music, as suggested by Guido Adler in 1884⁴, adapted by Jaap Kunst to be the study of “mainly the music and the musical instruments of all non-European

³ See Aristotle's thoughts described above.

⁴ Guido Adler, em *Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft. Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 1, menciona: “Comparative musicology has as its task the comparison of the musical works- especially the folksongs-of the various peoples of the earth for ethnographical purposes, and the classification of them according to their variety” (Adler, 1885, p. 5-20).

peoples, including both the so-called primitive peoples and the civilized Eastern nations?” (Kunst, 1950, p. 7). The latter perception was echoed thereafter in definitions recorded in various dictionaries⁵. Is ethnomusicology a study of culture “as a collective fiction, contested, temporal, and emergent?” (Wade, 2006, p. 196). Is ethnomusicology the study of music in its social and cultural contexts as a social process in order to understand not only what music is but what it means to its practitioners and audiences (Helser, cited in Merriam, 1977, p. 198). Last but not least, is ethnomusicology “the hermeneutic science of human musical behavior”, or a “study of music in culture” (Merriam, 1960, p. 109).

These definitions and similar others reflect realities of the period and the intellectual maturity of their proponents. They address “what” and ignore “Why” study ethnomusicology. Time has come for to adventure outside the comfort of status quo definitions from the past and construct new research models befitted for the complexity of new research challenges. As a fundamental phase of the inquiry, data gathering will provide a well-sounded understanding of the cultural concept of music and determine its significance in the community. This mode of thinking also views data gathering process as a pre-requisite to be kept in mind that music is the subject and not the objective of ethnomusicological investigation. For archeologists are excited to excavate for artifacts or the ethnomusicologists who discover a new genre of music for example, are satisfied with the knowledge obtained from the qualitative interpretation of their finding that will help to elucidate the presence of human beings on this planet. I disagree with readers who may argue that this point is “sous entendu” (implicit) and self-explanatory within existing definitions.

“How?” – Research Method in Ethnomusicology

The phenomenologically oriented paradigm⁶ is the ideal research model for the study in ethnomusicology. This approach expects researchers to be cognizant of a wide range of theory and method that can be employed as building blocks in the construction of a holistic model of reaching out that ensures ethnomusicologist to discover the interrelationships among various systems and subsystems in a community or music under study with an emphasis on the contextualization of data (Fetterman, 2010, p. 19).

⁵ Acessado no Oxford Languages Dictionary em 29 de jun. de 2022.

⁶ This paradigm helps to make explicit assumptions about culture catalyst of human behavior.

This analytical model is attained, among other, with heavy borrowing from anthropology, ethnology and ethnography, which marked pivotal phases in the development of ethnomusicology since in 1956. Whereas the ethnology applies sociocultural theories and research methods with mankind's behavior as the center of studies, the ethnography remains primarily descriptive. These changes are summarized by Bonnie Wade in her article "Fifty Years of SEM in the United States: A Retrospective". In this article Wade outlines a series of paradigm shifts in the evolutionary phases of ethnomusicology during the fifty years of its existence.

We [ethnomusicology] have moved, from a predominance of explicitly comparative method, to a predominance of ethnographic research; from a very early focus on music in human history in evolutionary terms, to focus on music in cultural contact; from analysis of structures of items and of systems, to a focus on analysis of structures of meaning; from an understanding of music as reflective of culture, to music as an affecting force in culture, an agent of social meaning; from a focus on place to a focus on space again, with our antennae alert to the important ideas emerging in other disciplines which ideas we stand ready to explore and to which we can hopefully begin to contribute through our studies of music (Wade, 2006, p. 190-198).

Considering that the concept of music is culturally based, Alan P. Merriam defines this study subject of ethnomusicology as "a product of man [...], whose structure cannot have an existence of its own divorced from the behavior which produces it (Merriam, 1964, p. 7). Therefore, "to understand why a music structure exists as it does", concludes Merriam, "ethnomusicologist must also understand how and why the behavior which produces it is as it is, and how and why the concepts which underlie that behavior are ordered in such a way as to produce the particularly desired form of organized sound" (Merriam, 1964, p. 7). This broad-based definition of music not only complied with the anthropologist Franz Boas's theory of cultural relativism⁷ but it also empowered communities to define music on the grounds of their respective concept. Merriam's definition also triggered a paradigm shift in the focus of study and recognized music as a universal phenomenon of human behavior (Nketia, 1963, p. 1). Therefore, if the behavior and thought of human beings are derived culturally, as suggest Edgerton and Langness⁸, then the comprehension of this behavior

⁷ All cultures were equal, but simply to be understood in their own contexts and by their own terms.

⁸ Cf. Edgerton and Lewis (1974).

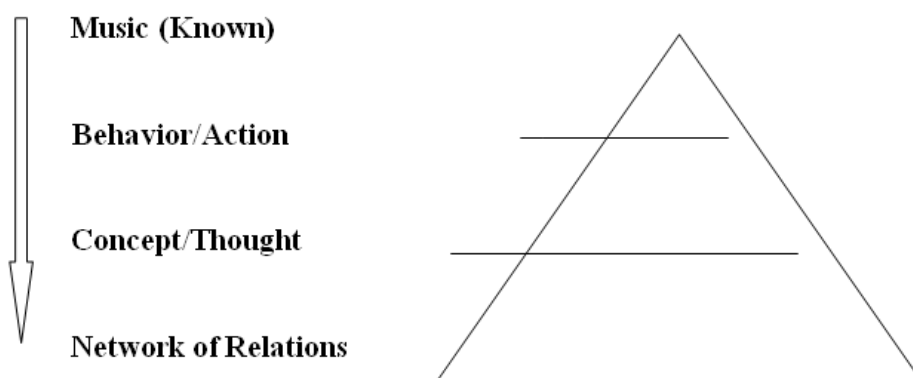
necessitates a suited analytical model capable of shedding light on the rules and codes pertaining to the milieu where humans dwell and interact.

Each discipline of the humanities is called upon to analyze and to provide a clear knowledge for the general understanding of mankind's existence. This objective orients ethnomusicologists to view their field of study also as a mankind's attempt to self-study and understand his existence in time and space (Langness, 1974, p. 1). Cultural anthropology, asserts Langness, is only one part of man's efforts to learn more about himself (Idem). In light of this discourse, it can be deduced that as with the cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology is also committed to discover how mankind thinks, behaves, and what is the catalyst of his music behavior in community.

Practically, in ethnomusicology “Music” is the gate through which the quest for human behavior is carried out. Even in such branches as Anthropology of Music, Sociology of Music, Music Therapy, for example, music functions as gate keeper for the objectives of Anthropology, Sociology, and Therapy. By studying the behavior of the music maker, ethnomusicologists seek to unveil the true identity of the composer in the cultural context of his community. To accomplish his mission, ethnomusicologists are compelled to borrow from other fields. Observations about the intellectual capacity of past scholars were expressed within the broad-based theoretical frame of reference. According to Fetterman (2010, p. 5): “theory is a guide to practice. No study can be conducted without an underlining theory or model”. It is imperative that the theoretical model chosen by ethnomusicologist is suitable to investigate the foundation of the motive of behavior that produced a structure of music the way it is. The logical answer here requires the construction of a branching out theoretical model that forces the researcher to apply cautiously the esthetic⁹ paradigm to interpret data from the known element “music” (product of his behavior) to the unknown (the source of influence that affect human's behavior in community/society (Mukuna, 2008). This holistic approach is often referred to as the “Merriam model”:

⁹ A term used in semiotics to describe perceptive and productive levels, processes, and analyses of symbolic forms. In this context, music is being approached as a symbolic form.

Figure 1 – Merriam’s Model Esthetic Paradigm



(Developed by the author)

This model is corroborated by an interesting confrontation that occurs in the last sequence of the 20th Century Fox film “The Planet of the Apes” (1968). The Ape archaeologist Cornelius and his wife Zhura find some artifacts in a cave located in the forbidden zone that corroborate their theory that the apes’ civilization was subsequent to that of humans. Such objects as human faulty heart valve, eyeglass frames, and the human baby doll at the site that could be argued by the keeper of the faith, the most convincing of these artifacts was the speaking human doll in the civilization where humans were mutes. Finding artifacts is exciting, but what motivates archaeologists is the information they get from artifacts. For this reason, in ethnomusicology the interpretation of music should not be limited to empty debates of the endo-semantic level of music, which focuses on pure musical analysis, but extended to the exo-semantic level of music, which reveals the circum-musical sources of its meaning/truth (Brigh, 1963).¹⁰

“Why?” – Goal of Ethnomusicology

The goal of ethnomusicology should be similar to that of “Anthropology,” which according to Langness, “is simply the attempt for human beings to study and hence to understand themselves at all times and in all places” (Langness, 1974). For that motive, to

¹⁰ Cf. Solis (2012).

attain the intended result, humans have broken down every field of study into specialized branches. This concept is not uncommon in archeology, sociology, and musicology.

Although the archeologist gets excited to find strange artifacts, he becomes mostly satisfied with the information he obtains from interpreting those artifacts. Similarly, what motivates ethnomusicologist the most should be the hidden information (historical, geographical, cultural, religious) he deduces from a musical instrument or a new style of music. Ethnomusicologists must not remain satisfied with the status quo descriptive definitions inherited from their predecessors but be proactive in their thought process to adventure into the unknown scientific frontiers and distinguish justified beliefs from opinion. They have to recognize the importance of understanding the epistemological basis of a selected model prior to applying it to their study (Fetterman, 2010).

It is clear that Merriam's definition of music addresses the praxis and not the goal of ethnomusicology. It focuses on behavior as a prerequisite for the understanding of why music is the way it is. With this statement, Merriam limits ethnomusicology to the study of the subject and not the object. I concur with Mantle Hood reacts with this statement: "In addition to purely musical information, various *objectives* toward which the study leads might encompass a better understanding of two or more societies or individuals or groups within a society as to behavior" (Hood, 1971).

In conclusion, an ideal definition of ethnomusicology has to be inclusive and explicit of its epistemological interfaces, (identity, scope, method), and capable to articulate the goal of the study. I propose this iconic definition to read: **"Ethnomusicology is a branch of socio-humanities discipline, in search of knowledge toward the understanding of the human being, through a profound contextual analysis of all his music expressions"**.

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