Negotiating Cultural Identity through the Arts: The African Cultural Memory Youth Arts Festival (ACMYAF)

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This thesis is presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Murdoch University, 2012 Western Australia
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work, which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Peter Mbago Wakholi
Abstract

Negotiating Cultural Identity through the Arts: The African Cultural Memory Youth Arts Festival (ACMYAF) examines ways in which African cultural memory, and the extent to which the arts based approaches benefited the cultural identity socialisation experiences of young people of African migrant descent. Arts were used to explore the identities of a group of youth of African descent, as a means to developing understanding of the issues relating to their bicultural socialisation and ways in which Arts-based strategies could be used to address them towards bicultural competence. Bicultural competence implies the ability to function successfully in both the dominant and subordinate culture.

The research project was motivated by the fact that Australian youth of African descent experience psychosocial challenges to their cultural identity development. Quite often this includes a denigration of their African cultures and identities through monocultural and exclusive cultural practices of Eurocentric Australia. And yet the young people involved in this study carry with them embodied knowledge and memories from African culture acquired through cultural socialisation prior to arrival in Australia as well as in ‘African’ homes in Australia, through parental cultural education and transmission. Such knowledge and cultural values play a significant role in identity formation and self-concept of the African descendant youth in Australia.

Accordingly the festival was organised as an aesthetic and educative theatrical event using the Ujamaa circle and the African centred pedagogy theory, Participatory action research and Performance as a research Inquiry for the project. A participatory approach, through educative dialogue and performance
enabled the participants to reveal their own embodied knowledge about African cultural memory leading to an educative exploration of its relevance through theatrical events. The process also enabled the participants to recall and document their cultural memories and subsequently reflect on their significance to identity negotiation and construction. The methodological research process became a Bicultural Socialisation Education Program (BSEP) because it enabled the participants through the theatrical events to integrate both subordinate and dominant cultural ideas towards self-affirming epistemologies and achieve a positive self-concept of themselves.

It is the study’s conclusion that the festival, as a third space, enabled the participants to explore African cultural memory educatively by enacting art forms and dialogue that informed their African Australian identities. Furthermore, the methodological approach enabled the participants to reveal factors that influenced their bicultural socialisation experience, namely: visibility, racism, criminal stereotyping, alienation and specific issues relating to intergenerational relations. These factors present ongoing psycho-social challenges to the participants and in turn influence their bicultural socialisation experience and self-concept.

The methodological approach was effective in enabling the participants, as a group of diverse African identities to develop an African Australian sensibility and to become conscious of their own agency in mobilising African cultural memory in an Australian context, towards bicultural competence.
‘Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi’
‘It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten’
Keywords

African; African Centred; African Australian; Alienation; Bicultural Competence; Bicultural Socialisation; Ujamaa Circle; Critical Pedagogy; Cultural Literacy; Cultural Memory; Cultural Democracy; Cultural Identity; Dominant; Diaspora; Ethnicity; Festival; Marginalisation; Migrant; Multiculturalism; Participatory; Performance; Politics; Racism; Refugee; Subordinate; Third Space; Youth; Young People.
Acknowledgements and Dedications

The thesis project was a community based festival involving twelve young people of African descent, five patrons, two community artists and the researcher as the facilitator and cultural translator. I therefore wish to extend my sincere thanks to the young people involved in the project for trusting the process, sharing their stories, and creative imagination that culminated into an informative and educative festival. I also wish to thank the patrons for sparing their time to support the project, and the artists for playing an important role in facilitating some of the sessions towards informative performances.

I would also like to acknowledge the organisations that provided funding and resources for the project— The City of Stirling (WA); Healthway (WA), the Office of Crime Prevention (WA), The Afrikan Community in Western Australia (ACWA) and Murdoch University, without their generosity it would have been impossible to accomplish this project.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, many thanks to my supervisors, Dr. David Moody and Dr. Peter Wright your support and feedback is immensely appreciated. I have learnt so much from you.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wife Nasimolo Sarah Wakholi and our girls; Namusobya Wakholi Kamulegeya, Hasahya Wakholi, Namulwa Wakholi and Mirembe Musenero Wakholi for the support, passion and love. We have to tell our stories and through performance we legitimise our humanity. Ata demba satwihula!
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACL</td>
<td>African Cultural Literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACM</td>
<td>African Cultural Memory</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACMYAF</td>
<td>African Cultural Memory Arts Festival</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADY</td>
<td>African Descendant Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSEP</td>
<td>Bicultural Socialisation Educational Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPT</td>
<td>Critical African Centred Pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>Elimu circle</td>
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<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>Patron Committee</td>
</tr>
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<td>PAR</td>
<td>Participatory Action Research</td>
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<td>PaRI</td>
<td>Performance as Research Inquiry</td>
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<td>RVJ</td>
<td>Reflective Visual Journal</td>
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<td>UC</td>
<td>Ujamaa circle</td>
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Glossary of key African-source terms

**Ajabu**
- to be surprised; to wonder

**Ata demba satwihula**
- Keep working at it; do not give up easily

**Baraka**
- Blessing(s); prosperity; abundance

**Elimu**
- Knowledge; education; science

**Mungu**
- God

**Sankofa**
- Return to the source

**Uhuru**
- Freedom; independence

**Ujamaa**
- Family ties; relationship; brotherhood/ sisterhood