

**Rural backgrounds and academic strategies:  
Higher education, the Music Department and the *Indigenous  
Music and Oral History Project* at the University of Fort Hare,  
South Africa**

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**Abstract**

Higher education at the Alice campus of the University of Fort Hare is a challenge, for the majority of the students come from rural villages, in which a traditional and above all oral culture determines the pivotal life. But in terms of the strategic plan of the university, the departments are committed to raising academic standards and to ensure a certain pass rate.

In former times the syllabus of the Music Department at the University of Fort Hare was based on a Western canon. Then, in 1995 when Dave Dargie became HOD of the Music Department, a change took place, which paid attention to the above-mentioned rural backgrounds. Dargie shifted the focus from Western to African music and put emphasis on African music instruments of the region, i.e. different kinds of musical bows such as Uhadi, Umrhubhe and Ikatari. He furthermore applied ways of teaching, which he had learned during his work in the Lumko District. In the 1970s and 1980s Dave Dargie had done research in this District, and in the context of the II. Vatican Council he had to find and to rearrange traditional music for the liturgical service. He therefore not only knew the indigenous music of the Xhosa perfectly, but

he also got acquainted with a phenomenon, which he later described as “Gestalt”-perception. He had found out about this phenomenon when he trained marimba players for a mission. Marimbas had not until then been known to the Nguni in the Eastern Cape and it took eight months to teach them in a European abstract way how to play them. When his marimba players later taught other groups in a rather African and concrete manner, it only took two weekends. Dargie observed, that the people in the region experienced and imagined music as a *whole*, i.e. as a “Gestalt”, and later, when he became HOD of the Music Department at the University of Fort Hare, he used this observation in the classroom. A further motivation for this step was his personal background, namely his participation in the struggle against apartheid. Therefore the African way of teaching was for him also an act of liberation of the surprised.

Nevertheless the shift of the focus from Western to African music, which took place in 1995, was not only a concession made on the tide of democratisation. It was a step towards the culture of the region. Dargie took into account the indigenous backgrounds of the students, and in consequence he applied basic structures of the oral tradition of the Xhosa in his lectures and gave preference to African instruments. African music history, Xhosa scales, musical bows and marimbas are still the main components of the “practical-theory” module at the Music Department.

Since 2003 the so-called *Indigenous Music and Oral History Project (IMOHP)*, which is located at the University of Fort Hare, has been supporting this idea insofar as it has been collecting and promoting indigenous music. Funded by the National Arts Department, the University of Fort Hare, the University of Venda and the University of Zululand were awarded grants,

“for the purpose of conducting pilot projects on the state of Music and Oral History in each of the three provinces in which these universities are located. There is some urgency with which this research needs to be conducted, because both indigenous music and oral history constitute key facets of the area of intangible heritage.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A Summary Of The Indigenous Music and Oral History Project, File: IMOHP Founding Documents, Music Department, University of Fort Hare.

From this point of view the conservation of the national heritage in above-mentioned provinces was the main motive for the creation of the *IMOHP*. But from the beginning the research results have also been an integral part of the teaching at the Music Department; songs and techniques of music instrument-making were taught in class, and recordings were used as study material. Furthermore postgraduate students were involved in the research activities of the *IMOHP* and to a certain extent were obliged to participate in community outreach projects led by their lecturers; i.e. workshops for teachers and introductions to traditional instruments in schools. Therefore the knowledge collected by the academic staff and the students of the university was partly brought back to the communities. Thus outreach was also “inreach”.

Two of the newest projects or outcomes of the *IMOHP* will be a Xhosa terminology and a *Manual for Schools* on Xhosa music and instruments (first volume to be published in 2008). The first one is to be translated into different languages for academic purposes. The second one is intended to prepare future university students, but while still attending school. For the university, as Minister Naledi Pandor recently stated, must not be an ivory tower, but has to transmit knowledge already in the villages.

But even though some educational preparation might be done at the roots, the real challenge remains at the Department, namely the transition of students from an oral to a written tradition, and from a traditional to a globalising culture.

Higher education at the Alice campus of the University of Fort Hare is a challenge, for the majority of the students come from rural villages, in which a traditional and above all oral culture determines the pivotal life. But in terms of the current strategic plan of the university, the departments are committed to raising academic standards.

Opened in 1916, the University of Fort Hare started as South African Native College. Affiliated with Rhodes University in 1951, it was called University College of Fort Hare and at the beginning of the 1970s it became the University of Fort Hare. In the 1980s the state tried to turn it into a Xhosa “bush college” under the control of the Ciskei

Homeland government.<sup>2</sup> Especially since the late 1990s efforts have been made to bring the University back to an academic and international standard, and at the beginning 2000s one further campus in East London could be incorporated into the University of Fort Hare. Since then excellence in teaching and research has been a main goal, as we can read in the current mission and vision.

“The University of Fort Hare is a vibrant, equitable and sustainable African University, committed to teaching and research excellence at the service of its students, scholars and the wider community. [...]

The mission of the University is to provide high quality education of international standard contributing to the advancement of knowledge that is socially and ethically relevant, and applying that knowledge to the scientific, technological and socio-economic development of our nation and the wider world.”<sup>3</sup>

Fort Hare is modernizing, and in the following paper I will lay out some characteristic features and recent developments in the Music Department under the following headings:

History and teaching at the Music Department

The Indigenous Music and Oral History Project (IMOHP) and the Indigenous Orchestra  
Recent Developments at the Music Department

### **1. History and teaching at the Music Department**

In former times and due to the general history of music education and musicology in the country the syllabus of the Music Department at the University of Fort Hare was based on a Western canon. The first individuals to found conservatories and establish

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<sup>2</sup> Institutional Quality Audit 2008. Living our Mission, instructive papers distributed to the HODs in February 2008, p.15-16; University of Fort Hare. General Prospectus, 2007, p. 29-31.

<sup>3</sup> Institutional Quality Audit 2008, p. 20. In the prospectus of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities we can read: “The Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities is committed to the advancement of knowledge that is socially and ethically relevant through innovation and excellence in its academic programme, and aims thereby to contribute to the public good in South African society and the wider world. [...] The Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities will provide an academic and educational environment that ensures the optimal acquisition of critical skills and competencies by our students as well as advancing the intellectual growth and development of our staff.” University of Fort Hare. Prospectus of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities 2008, p. 1.

music departments in South Africa were musicians from one of the “mother countries”, for example: Jannasch the founder of the Konservatorium in Stellenbosch, who had German origins and his successor Endler, who was an Austrian. Bell and Chisholm at Cape Town were British, and in Rhodes University we find again Austrians, namely Hartmann, Gruber and Mayr. “The first South African-born departmental heads”, as Socrates Paxinos states in his article *Musicology in South Africa*, were “consolidators” (Paxinos, 1986: 11), and:

“They were largely concerned with the provision of facilities in terms of buildings and equipment. They felt that music in South Africa would best be served by stimulating practical performance and by developing teacher-training. These two aspects reflect the higher educational scene most strongly to the present.”(Paxinos, 1986: 11)

Also the foundation of musicology in South Africa is at the beginning linked with Europe, for the first representatives of the discipline, such as Van der Walt, Malan and Van der Linde were trained in Cologne, Vienna and Bonn (Paxinos, 1986: 10).

The history of the institutionalized music education at the historically black University of Fort Hare starts in 1974, when Georg Gruber, the Austrian professor who previously had led the Music Department at Rhodes University, was appointed in order to establish a Music Department. At the beginning the Department was accommodated in the Faculty of Education, offering as qualification the degree Bachelor of Pedagogics (B Ped), which could be obtained after three years of study of music and music education. “Music” in this context meant theory and history of music up to grade 6; grade 8 is more or less equivalent to the first year of theory at university level. Singing, teaching and choir work built the educational backbone at that time – and it still does today, even though we now offer the degree BA. The comparatively “low level” at the Music Department is rooted in the social background of the students, who come mostly from rural regions, i.e. they were not familiar with staff notation or Western music. But Gruber understood how to counter this challenging situation. He was “specialised in twentieth-century music and relationships between African music and modern composition techniques” (Paxinos, 1986: 13). Exclusively for Fort Hare, he wrote a

manual entitled “From Tonic Solfa to Staff Notation” (Gruber, 1974), for the majority of the students were more familiar with tonic solfa than with Western notation.<sup>4</sup>

Under Gruber’s successor, Prof. Potgieter who ran the Department until the late 1980s, Western music was highlighted above all, and this trend continued until the mid 1990s.

Then, in 1995 when Dave Dargie became HOD of the Music Department, a change took place, which paid attention to the above-mentioned rural backgrounds. Dargie shifted the focus from Western to African music and put emphasis on African music instruments of the region, i.e. different kinds of musical bows such as Uhadi, Umrhubhe and Ikatari.<sup>5</sup> He furthermore applied ways of teaching which he had learned during the course of his work in the Lumko District. In the 1970s and 1980s Dave Dargie had done research in this District, and in the context of the II. Vatican Council he had to find and rearrange traditional music for the liturgical service (Hawn, 2003: 107-120). He therefore not only knew the indigenous music of the Xhosa perfectly, but he also got acquainted with a phenomenon, which he later described as “Gestalt”-perception. He had found out about this phenomenon when he trained marimba players for a mission. Marimbas had not until then been known to the Nguni in the Eastern Cape and it took eight months to teach them in an European abstract way how to play them. When his marimba players later taught other groups in a rather African and concrete manner, it only took two weekends.

“Marimbas are unknown traditionally among the Nguni of South Africa, (the fact that marimbas were totally strange enabled them to escape much of the Xhosa main-line church prejudice against drums and traditional instruments) so it took me some eight months to train the first team of youngsters to accompany a whole sung Mass. When the nearby mission at Mackay’s Nek bought a set of marimbas, I recommended the priest to get our boys to teach players for him. I had used teaching based on abstractions: «The chords are C-E-G etc.»; «hold

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<sup>4</sup> According to Dave Dargie, interview, 14 March 2008, in the Music Department, Fort Hare University.

<sup>5</sup> University of Fort Hare Music Department. Music Syllabi as proposed in 1998 and 1999, duly approved by the Arts Faculty Board and the University Senate (1998 and 1999), and introduced in 1999 and 2000 respectively, hard copy available at the Music Department.

the stick like this», and so on. I suspected that traditional methods would work much better, the idea being to let the new performers experience the music as a whole, to use traditionally highly-developed sense of perception to absorb the skills directly without the intermediary of «teaching». At the end of a week-end, six players had made a start at Mackay's Nek (taught only by our boys, all of Ngqoko, in my absence). A few weeks later our boys were again «borrowed» for a week-end, and that was the end of the teaching. Some months later the mission at Qoqodala to the north of Mackay's Nek bought marimbas, and the Mackay's Nek group taught the Qoqodala players. [...]

All this seems to prove two points – (a) that Gestalt learning/teaching is truly in Africa; and (b) that African traditional conceptualisation is not abstract but concrete. One may take a further step and say it is concrete in a human way: the focus is on what is human and what is done by humans.” (Dargie, 1988: 63)

As mentioned in the quotation, Dargie had observed that the people in the region experienced and imagined music as a *whole*, i.e. as a “Gestalt”, and later, when he became HOD of the Music Department at the University of Fort Hare, he used this observation in the classroom. A further motivation for this step was his personal background, namely his participation in the struggle against apartheid.

“During these turbulent times, white priests and ministers occasionally would march among the people during funerals. The police forbade the assembly of blacks under most circumstances and sometimes used public funeral processions as an opportunity to open fire on the mourners. Dargie participated in these processions. While their presence tended to mitigate against police violence in these processions, there were no guarantees. Dargie recalled that a young man, Bigboy Mginywa, was shot and killed directly in front of him at one funeral.” (Hawn, 2003: 111)

Therefore the African way of teaching was for him also an act of liberation of the suppressed. Nevertheless the shift of the focus from Western to African music, which took place in 1995, was not only a concession made on the tide of democratisation. It

was a step towards the culture of the region. Dargie took into account the indigenous backgrounds of the students, and in consequence he applied basic structures of the oral tradition of the Xhosa in his lectures and gave preference to African instruments. African music history, Xhosa scales, musical bows and marimbas are still the main components of the “practical-theory” module at the Music Department.

## **2. The Indigenous Music and Oral History Project (IMOHP) and the Indigenous Orchestra**

Since 2003 the so-called *Indigenous Music and Oral History Project (IMOHP)*, which is located at the University of Fort Hare, has been supporting this idea insofar as it has been collecting and promoting indigenous music.<sup>6</sup> The first project leader of the IMOHP was Alvin Petersen. Funded by the National Arts Department, the University of Fort Hare, the University of Venda and the University of Zululand were awarded grants,

“for the purpose of conducting pilot projects on the state of Music and Oral History in each of the three provinces in which these universities are located. There is some urgency with which this research needs to be conducted, because both indigenous music and oral history constitute key facets of the area of intangible heritage.”<sup>7</sup>

From this point of view the conservation of the national heritage in above-mentioned provinces was the main motive for the creation of the *IMOHP*. But from the beginning the research results have also been an integral part of the teaching at the Music Department; songs and techniques of music instrument-making were taught in class, and recordings were used as study material. Still today the students have to learn how to make their own instruments, i.e. musical bows of the region. Furthermore postgraduate students are involved in the research activities of the *IMOHP* and to a certain extent they are obliged to participate in community outreach projects led by

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<sup>6</sup> With reference to its foundation see correspondence between Derrick Swartz and Minister Ben Ngubane, 30 November 2003, IMOHP Correspondence IN, Music Department, University of Fort Hare.

<sup>7</sup> A Summary Of The Indigenous Music and Oral History Project, File: IMOHP Founding Documents, Music Department, University of Fort Hare.

their lecturers; i.e. workshops for school teachers and introductions to traditional instruments in schools. Therefore the knowledge collected by the academic staff and the students of the university is partly brought back to the communities. Thus outreach is also “inreach” in ethnomusicological terms.<sup>8</sup>

Another modern initiative within the IMOHP was the foundation of an Indigenous Orchestra led by Nelson Mandela’s grand-daughter Tandile Mandela. Tandile is responsible for the practical application of the results of the IMOHP research trips and the promotion of traditional music in the Eastern Cape. Her orchestra consists of approximately 20 members. Some of the instruments played in the performances derive from the Eastern Cape, like the traditional bows Uhadi, Umrhubhe and Ikatari, but some do not belong to the region, such as marimba, kudu horns and West African drums (for example Jembes). A certain percentage of the songs is composed by Tandile and shows influences of the Jazz and Hip-Hop. One might say that the orchestra is a place where tradition and modernity meet, because on the one side most of the songs are based on traditional text and on the other side they address modern problems, such as the discrimination against women and HIV/AIDS sufferers. The song *Ingculaza* was for example written on the initiative of Tandile’s grandfather Nelson Mandela and encourages talking about HIV/AIDS. Until today many black South Africans hesitate to talk about AIDS and it still happens that infected people get stigmatized. Also Tandile was scared that her orchestra could be associated with the topic HIV/AIDS, and it took one year before *Ingculaza* was sung in public for the first time, i.e. in 2006 in Cape Town. The reaction of the audience was overwhelming, but surprisingly only white people contacted Tandile after the concert in order to get more information on the song.

### **3. Recent Developments at the Music Department**

Abovementioned developments might easily lead to an optimistic view, but it is more appropriate to see things in a realistic way. The University is still trying to get rid of its reputation as racially linked “bush college”, which it got during Apartheid.

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Sheehy defines outreach as knowledge brought to an external community, whereas inreach is aimed to the source community of the cultural form (Sheehy, 1991: 333).

“UFH is one of only two ‘previously disadvantaged’ Institutions that retained a ‘university’ status after the transformation process in higher education, and the only one that incorporated a ‘previously advantaged’ campus [East London, which formerly belonged to Rhodes University] without the classical merger scenario. Indeed, the acquisition of the E[ast] L[ondon] campus poses various challenges and opportunities for the University. One of these is that of re-establishing the University as a non-racial Institution, particularly as in its early years it had a non-racial character, which was subsequently eroded by racial policies implemented in 1958. This new non-racial composition faces challenges of its own as we go forward. Amongst these challenges has been the Rhodes-Fort Hare comparison on the East London (EL) campus in terms of resources, culture, standards, etc. Already we have seen a drop in the number of White students on that campus over the first three years since the incorporation. The question we need to answer is whether the initial shock of the incorporation will be overcome, and whether their numbers will grow again. This is crucial for the University as we endeavour to achieve a student composition that reflects the demographics of our country. It is one of the elements needed to be able to achieve the goal of ‘Living Our Mission’.”<sup>9</sup>

As a matter of fact more than 99% of the students at the Alice campus are black, and the numbers of white students at the East London campus dropped about by 14% between 2006 and 2007. White staff members constitute 17.7% of the university’s workforce whereas they constitute 5.2% of the Eastern Cape population.<sup>10</sup> In other words: With reference to the demographic background of the Eastern Cape there are too many black students and too many white lecturers – or not enough white students and not enough black lecturers. Another challenge is the economic situation in the Eastern Cape, i.e. an unemployment rate of 53.5%. “65.2% of the households exist with an income of less than R1500/month”, which is equal to 150 Euros.<sup>11</sup> This might explain why only 12% of the students who study for the BA in Arts obtain their degrees in the regular three years. 37% receive the degree after two, and 42% after three

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<sup>9</sup> Note of the Vice-Chancellor Dr. Mvuyo Tom, in: Institutional Quality Audit 2008, pp. 11-12.

<sup>10</sup> Institutional Quality Audit 2008, pp. 22, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Institutional Quality Audit 2008, p. 20.

additional years; the latter group consists mostly of socio-economically disadvantaged students.<sup>12</sup>

In order to lift the academic standard and to cope with the backgrounds of the students the Music Department initiated the following improvements:

In 2007 it appointed new staff for the practical components of our modules, especially for the Western theory, which has been neglected for several years. Since then piano, recorder and solo as well as ensemble singing have been taught again. Teaching theory in practice is based on Dave Dargie's idea of a concrete African understanding of music, and we intend to train our students in a way which makes them employable after their studies. A surprising outcome of this change is, that for the first time in the history of the department, a student is a finalist for a SAMRO bursary and meets national standards. The same student already sang the part of the Queen of the night in Mozart's Magic Flute,<sup>13</sup> which was given by the Eastern Cape Opera Company. A link with this Opera Company was also established at the beginning of 2007. The singers get their ensemble and individual lessons now partly in the Music Department in Fort Hare. The next project of the Indigenous Orchestra, an African opera on the Xhosa prophet Ntsikana, is planned in co-operation with the Eastern Cape Opera Company. Ntsikana will be a very distinctive production, for it is based on traditional Xhosa music and it will include choirs from the villages, which are to be trained by the Indigenous Orchestra and the director of the Eastern Cape Opera Company, Gwyneth Lloyd. Therefore this opera project can be seen as community outreach, because it also helps to transmit knowledge on indigenous music in the villages through practical participation.

As a next step the Music Department is planning a BMus with specialisation on African music and an extension in East London. The aim of the BMus is to create professional musicians, for the regular BA only opens the door to an academic career. The extension in East London is supposed to attract again a multi-ethnic audience. An international exchange programme with the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich is also on the way. An agreement on faculty level with the Fort Hare University was signed this March.

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<sup>12</sup> Institutional Quality Audit 2008, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Between July and September 2007 the opera was given in East London, Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown and Port Alfred.

Our research focus is also facing changes. Right now the *IMOHP* is working on a Xhosa terminology and on a *Manual for Schools* on Xhosa music and instruments. The first one, the Xhosa terminology, is to be translated into different languages for academic purposes and has to be considered a long term project. Based on Dave Dargie's *Xhosa Music Terminology* (Dargie, 2005), the IMOHP terminology includes expressions and musical phenomena found during recent research trips in different regions of the Eastern Cape. It also includes comments, which sometimes even contrast common "opinions" concerning so-called tradition. In combination with a separate questionnaire it serves to clarify the musical situation in the villages during the research trips. Afterwards the findings are used in class. Thus it is an important tool in the daily teaching and it reflects a quite particular feature of the Music Department, namely applied Ethnomusicology.

The second one, the *Manuals for Schools*, is intended to prepare future university students, but while still attending school. The majority of our students start their studies with practically no knowledge in music, whereas a minority is already quite advanced. Hopefully this gap can be closed through preparations in the secondary schools. We furthermore take into consideration, what Minister Naledi Pandor stated in August 2007: that the university must not be an ivory tower, but has to transmit knowledge already in the villages.<sup>14</sup>

As the last research trips brought to light, there is generally an urgent need for teaching materials of this kind in the rural villages.

On the one hand – as we were explained – older people are scared of a loss of traditional culture and social values, which in consequence could lead to a state of decadence. In several occasions we were told that the younger people lose their roots and, that as a result they have premature sexual contacts and therefore they easily get HIV/AIDS, that they abuse drugs, and that they commit crimes.<sup>15</sup> An interesting secondary response was, that due to the vanishing culture, the older people cannot educate the youth anymore (education in this context also means physical

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<sup>14</sup> During the launch of the Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 2007 in East London.

<sup>15</sup> According to the members of the Nzenzeleni Performing Group, Fieldnotes 1 September 2007, and Florence Feni and Nqabisile Foslara from the Melani Conformation Choir, Fieldnotes 8 November 2007.

punishment), and that the young people have lost their respect for the old members of the communities, because they do not have the same modern educational background as the youth.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand younger people are in fact often no longer familiar with their tradition, but they are open and interested in their culture. Two main factors seem to be the reason for this lack of contact with the own culture: firstly the increasing urbanization and influence of modern media, which brings people into contact with the globalising world, and secondly the lack of older people who still play and teach indigenous instruments – especially in urban dwellings. As a result people sometimes speak about the destructive power of the so-called “West”, which in fact is nothing but the consequence of processes of adaption. The expression “the West” is insofar problematic, for it describes all foreign and global impacts.<sup>17</sup>

As can be seen easily, working on traditional music does not necessarily mean to exclude modern issues. During our research trips we met traditional music groups and choirs, which specifically tried to get hold of the youth or to address problems of the young generation, such as drug abuse or HIV/AIDS. Florence Feni, the founder of the *Melani Conformation Choir*, for example intends to keep the youngsters busy, and the members of the *Nzenzeleni Performing Group* educate the youth through traditional music, as in the case of the AIDS-song *Ugawulayo*.<sup>18</sup> *Ugawulayo* deals with a young women, who is not married, but has several children. In the song she is asked why she does not get married, and she is reminded that the nation gets extinguished by AIDS. Therefore she must not disturb other persons’ marriage. The song is sung like a prayer, supposed to influence the future of South Africa.<sup>19</sup> It is performed in every official function.

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<sup>16</sup> According to Obri Kholohkolo, Hobeni, Fieldnotes 16 February 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Several of my (post-)graduate students wanted to work on the impact of the destructive West on Xhosa tradition. Asked what the West is supposed to be, they talked simply about modern influences and media, which were not necessarily linked with the “West” but with global trends. Members of the Nzenzeleni Performing Group complained, that the youth follows those modern trends.

<sup>18</sup> Fieldnotes, Mkonjana, 1 September and Melani, 8 November 2008. See also: Bernhard Bleibinger: *La oralidad, la conservación de tradiciones y la batalla contra el SIDA. Observaciones y orientaciones en el Departamento de Música de la Universidad de Fort Hare, Súdfrica*, to be published in 2008 in the journal *Oráfrica*.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Barz mentions the same in the case of traditional music groups and HIV/AIDS in Uganda (Barz, 2006: 175-209).



HIV/AIDS is still a severe issue in South Africa. 20.1 % of the total population in South Africa was infected in 2001 (Barz, 2006: 11). The percentage of the Eastern Cape in 2006 was 30%, and in some regions the local medical staff mentions even 50% among the younger people.<sup>20</sup>

At the moment one of our PhD candidates works with traditional healers and the prevention of AIDS. And two of our honours students just started their research on the educational role of traditional Xhosa music. They also partly deal with AIDS.

In accordance with the Minister for Education the Music Department intends to transmit knowledge already in the villages. But even though some educational preparation might be done at the roots, the real challenge remains at the Department, namely the transition of students from an oral to a written tradition, and from a traditional to a globalising culture.

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<sup>20</sup> I got the data for the Eastern Cape from Dr. Norma Niekerk. Dr. Niekerk treats HIV patients in Hogsback and Alice and she forms part in a NGO, which focuses on the prevention of the disease.



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