

Why music matters: social aesthetics and cultural transmission*Jerome Lewis*

We may say that each social group has its music.

—Bruno Nettl (2000:465)

While social scientists and psychologists generally view language as being of such great value that it is often claimed to define the human condition and be central to our cognitive distinctiveness, there is much less agreement about the role of music. If music, like language, is a human universal, then how can we account for this? This chapter will suggest some answers. These will address three related aspects of BaYaka Pygmy musicking: the way it creates a sense of shared identity by establishing and structuring social groups; how it mirrors and thus reinforces social structure and political order; and how it ensures the transmission of key cultural orientations crucial for a successful hunting and gathering economy. The social aesthetics produced by participating in this music organize society by inculcating characteristic economic, political and ritual ways of interacting, establish a context that embodies key values such as sharing, and creates a special world of time where the deep structure of myth and BaYaka cosmology can be experienced by each generation. Through the ethnography I present I hope to offer some preliminary answers to the following questions: Why do people make music? What does music do in society? Why is music so effective at binding people into social groups?

The chapter ends by suggesting that music appears to have greater resilience than language, and that this resilience is likely to be due to music's special aesthetic, incorporative

and adaptive qualities, which ensure repetition without tedium, and structural or stylistic continuity while encompassing change.

Music, culture and society

We all have our own favourite music – whether classical, free-jazz, punk, reggae or heavy metal – and our preferences say something about what sort of a person we are. But how does music embody values or reflect identity? Popular theories of musical meaning and function emphasize its role in expressing sentiment and non-verbal ideals, and this is often referred to as ‘expressionism’. Such theorizing based on the presumed distinction between musically encoded feeling and linguistically encoded thought informs both social and cognitive accounts of the relationship between music and language. Perhaps due to the subjectivity of emotional affect, most anthropologists seem to shy away from taking music seriously. So too do social psychologists such as Steven Pinker, who views music as simply a by-product of language, a kind of lucky evolutionary ‘cheesecake’ (Pinker 1997: 534). In contrast, I present evidence to suggest that music is at the heart of how human societies transmit culture and creatively adapt it to their current circumstances, and that in societies where people must participate in musical performance in order for music to be enjoyed, music is at least as important as language, and possibly more so. The preponderance of recorded music in industrialized societies has led many to miss the importance of musical participation in human culture and society.

In most parts of the world, and for most of human history, music exists only because of the social relations that enable its performance. Recorded and notated music, in conjunction with increasing musical specialization in industrialized societies, have made the separation of performance and musical appreciation appear normal. From a cross-cultural and

historical perspective this is an anomaly. Extracting ‘music’ from the social context of performance is to miss much of its significance. Every social group has its music because ‘musicking’ (Rouget 1980) provides an embodied experience of key social aesthetics that guide participants in how to dwell together in the world, and how they can stretch to accommodate change in a structured way while maintaining some sense of continuity with the past.¹ These are processes of central concern to anthropology: the nature of identity, of values, of how groups establish coherence and continuity in the context of change, of cultural transmission and creativity. Yet surprisingly, anthropologists rarely consider music in their studies. Musical participation is often highly valued by the people anthropologists live amongst, yet we seem to suffer from what Alfred Gell called ‘methodological deafness’ (Gell 1995).

Early functionalist anthropology’s understanding of music was dominated by Radcliffe-Brown’s theory that he developed in his ethnography of the Andaman Islanders. Here he argued that an orderly social existence requires the transmission and maintenance of culturally desirable sentiments. Participation in music and dance ensures that each generation is inculcated with these sentiments, and that they are regularly revitalized in adults (Radcliffe-Brown 1922:233–4). His emphasis on the importance of ‘sentiment’ echoed earlier views put forward by Herbert Spencer in an article about the origins and function of dance (Spencer 1868). Spencer had suggested that, in addition to the verbal understandings and representations of the ideals of a society, the highest ideals of a society are non-verbal, and their expression is the basis of the non-verbal arts. How can the repeated experience of music and dance lead to people experiencing desirable sentiments and ‘the highest ideals’ of a society? How can music embody cultural meaning? What is the cultural significance of musical structure?

Richard Widdess (2012, 2014) has articulated these relationships in more modern language using the concept of ‘schema’ as developed in cognitive psychology, cognitive anthropology and music cognition. He describes schema as referring to:

an array of cognitive categories in a flexible relationship, which is acquired in memory through repeated experience and deployed in everyday life. Music employs highly specialized schemas that generate expectations (Huron 2006); they may be especially significant in orally transmitted music ... Schemas can also carry meanings, explicit or implicit, and many reappear in different, apparently unrelated domains of culture.

(Widdess 2014:1)

Widdess argues that the flexibility of meaning in music is also a characteristic of what cognitive anthropologists such as Bloch (1998) and Shore (1996) call ‘foundational cultural schemas’ – cross-domain, non-linguistic cultural models and cultural meanings that are central to producing what we recognize as the distinctiveness of a particular culture. I approximate to this distinctiveness with the term ‘social aesthetic’, since it is suggestive of the way that these schemas resonate across domains. Widdess (2006, 2012, 2014) uses vivid analyses of Nepalese and Australian music to illustrate the isomorphism between musical, visual, material, social and conceptual patterns of meanings, but points out that in his Nepalese case these were never verbally expressed to him. This is consistent with theory in cognitive anthropology: since schemas are best organized non-verbally, it would be surprising if they were easily verbally articulated. Rather, they ‘go without saying’ (Bloch 1998, 2012).

From this point of view, the human universal of musicking is an archetypal ‘foundational cultural schema’ that should be of particular interest to anthropology precisely because it is a major area of cultural knowledge that is not organized linguistically, cross-cuts

so many domains and is central to human cultural transmission and social organization. Each musical performance implicates many potential meanings and functions emerging from the sound and structure of the music itself, to the social and political relationships it establishes amongst performers and the way it refracts culture-specific concepts, history and identity. As such, musical styles promise to illuminate cultural analyses since ‘the highly specialised, schematic structures of music, and their realization through performance in context ... offer fertile ground for the discovery of cross-domain, non-linguistic cultural models and cultural meanings’ (Widdess 2012:94).

In more familiar anthropological terminology, music is a ‘total social fact’, because it weaves together, organizes and informs seemingly distinct practices and cultural institutions.² Music and dance deserve closer attention from anthropologists for what they do for human social groups, and why they are quasi-universally central to their self-definition. John Blacking expressed this when he wrote that music and dance ‘generate certain kinds of social experience that can be had in no other way ... Perhaps, like Lévi-Strauss’s “mythical thought”, they can be regarded as primary modelling systems for the organization of social life’ (Blacking 1985:65).

It continues to puzzle me why so many anthropologists do not consider music in theorizing or when describing a culture or social group. Ron Brunton (1989), for example, challenges the view that egalitarian societies, such as the BaYaka, with whom I work, are stable enough to transmit their cultural practices over time.³ Without authoritative individuals to condone or condemn innovations, argues Brunton, cultural practices and beliefs must be unstable, accidental and random assemblages, rather than coherent, effective and enduring cultural forms. He uses this to argue that it is no wonder that such egalitarian societies are so rare, since their continued existence is so fortuitous. However, precisely because of the absence of authoritative individuals, egalitarian societies provide an excellent anthropological

case study for demonstrating the significance of other cultural features, such as music or taboo (Lewis 2008), for assuring cultural continuity.

To demonstrate the importance of music, I build on a variety of musical analyses of Central African Pygmy music to highlight how participation in polyphonic singing engenders enduring cultural dispositions highly suited to an egalitarian hunter-gatherer lifestyle.⁴ Among BaYaka Pygmies of Congo-Brazzaville, participation in music and dance activity instantiates aesthetic principles that crosscut multiple cultural domains – from cosmology to gender relations, from hunting and gathering techniques to political organization. Dance and musical participation inculcates culture not as a text or set of fixed rules, but as a profound aesthetic orientation. Alan Lomax insightfully expressed this potential of musical performance:

The art of music ... lies in its capacity to repeat these [cultural] messages again and again in slightly disguised and subtly different ways. Here, at the level of musical conversation, we enter a limitless realm of nuance, where reinforcement never brings surfeit or fatigue, where the ear delights in playing with a scale of tiny differences, and the restatement of the familiar is not a command but an invitation to return home.

(Lomax 1962:450)

Pygmy polyphony exploits this reinforcement-by-delight capacity of music very effectively. Simha Arom (1978) describes how the singers repeat the periods underlying the polyphony, despite the song sounding as if it is in continuous development. The impression is purposeful, made possible by blurring transition points with multiple layers of overlapping counterpoint. While it sounds like each voice sings as it likes, underneath a rigorous musical organization constrains and frames innovation and creativity (Fürniss 2006; Fürniss and Joiris 2011). Each singer's inculcation into this musical deep structure enables them to know which variations

can be executed and when (Fürniss 1993). By learning how to join in the song appropriately, one is also learning how to behave appropriately. By regularly repeating the same process while musicking, particular BaYaka ways of doing things are inculcated, almost subliminally, among participants.

To illustrate this I will focus on the structure of BaYaka music, modes of participation in performance, and the social and political organization of the musicking group to show how and why the distinctive polyphonic vocal music of the BaYaka serves to transmit a particular Pygmy cultural aesthetic over time. The general principle is that musically encoded aesthetic orientations influence people's everyday decisions and behaviour by seducing us to conform using our aesthetic sense, enjoyment of harmony, desire to cooperate, curiosity and pleasure-seeking propensities.

What is music?

As Gerhard Kubik succinctly put it, 'Music is a pattern of sound as well as a pattern of body movement, both in creating this sound and in responding to it in dance' (Kubik 1979:228).

The relationship between music and dance parallels that between speech and gesture. Just as a speech act (speaking) is composed of linguistic and gestural components, so a musical act (musicking) necessarily includes a gestural component, in this case a rhythmical movement of the body we call 'song', 'dance', 'percussion' or 'playing' an instrument such as a flute or piano (Lewis 2013). For an anthropologist, this interdependence between sound and action is crucial for analysis since it connects the sounds heard with the actions producing them – keeping both the structure of the music and the social organization of the musicking group in analytical focus.

Some ethnomusicologists seem to distance themselves from an overt focus on music, preferring to study sound in order to better encompass the range of multimodal sounding practices experienced cross-culturally by researchers (see e.g. Harris, this volume). While this move is sensible to avoid ethnocentrically imposing Western definitions on human sounding practices, activities that are more obviously recognizable as ‘music’ can get lost from view. Steven Feld’s term ‘acoustemology’ joins ‘acoustics’ with ‘epistemology’ to focus on sound as a way of knowing. Acoustemology, Feld writes, ‘inquires into what is knowable, and how it becomes known through sounding and listening ... sounding and listening as knowing-in-action: a knowing with and a knowing through the audible’ (Feld 2015:12). This encompassing framework for studying how people socialize sound is elegant and inclusive. But the term ‘listening’ has a passive connotation in English that may understate the importance of embodied musical responses, gestures such as dancing or masquerading, and ‘sounding’ may not fully do justice to the analytical importance to the anthropologist of the social organization of the musicking group. Here I adopt John Blacking’s suggestion that ‘because music is humanly organised sound, there ought to be a relationship between patterns of human organisation and the patterns of sound produced as a result of human interaction’ (Blacking 2000:26).

While my focus is particularly on BaYaka musicking, I have described in other work some of their rich sounding and listening practices through which they seek to build and manage relationships with both human and non-human ‘persons’ sharing their environment – from forest spirits, duikers and monkeys to crocodiles, farmers and the forest as a sentient multi-organism (see Lewis 2009, 2013, 2014). These practices make extensive use of the possibilities of the language–music spectrum. At the musical end, Simha Arom described these groups’ vocal polyphony as ‘pure music’ since it so rarely has lyrics and is predominantly composed of overlapping melodic vowel sounds. At the language end, people

routinely increase their vocabulary by incorporating lexicons from other languages and animals' communicative sounds in speech, while increasing the arbitrariness between sign and meaning by removing consonants to contract words and by using sign language to augment communicative efficiency among the in-group, while disguising this from other human and non-human listeners (Lewis 2009, 2014).

Both speaking and musicking are universal kinds of human behaviour that combine gestural and sonic elements. Both are multi-modal, and expectancy, prosody and paralinguistic elements in speech and song are shared. These connections are exploited in certain communicative styles that mix language and music to capitalize on the range of expressive possibilities offered. For example, formalized political oratory, such as the Maori *haka*, combines speech, chant, gesture and dance to reinforce the statement. Meanwhile, traditional forms of lamentation in many societies mix distinctive gestures, dance, song and speech in formulaic ways (Feld 1982; Feld and Fox 1994:39–43), and storytelling traditions such as the BaYaka's sung fables (*gano* or *likano*) combine re-enactments of recounted events with songs and dances that punctuate the story.

There are also differences. Where language is based on units with fairly restricted shared meanings, music is constructed from units with multi-layered, fluctuating or no meaning. While both combine implicit embodied meanings (gesture and dance respectively) and explicit spoken or sung meanings, music does tend to prioritize the implicit and non-verbal, whereas language the explicit and the verbal. Music tends to formulaicness (Richman 2000:304), as pre-existing formulae – rhythms, riffs, themes or motifs – are cyclically repeated, often with slight variation or embellishment. Thus music tends to repeat the same utterances over and over, filled more with redundancies than explicit messages. By contrast language continually produces novel utterances through the recomposition of words and

gestures to create new meanings. Language is more suited to individuals' communication with others, whereas music is better adapted to groups wishing to communicate collectively.

In the BaYaka case the primary focus of music is to maintain dialogues: between men's and women's groups or children's and adults' groups; between the camp and game animals or the camp and the sentient forest. Musical performances establish the key contexts for individuals to identify themselves with particular groups in this society of nature. In a musicking group, BaYaka explore the strengths and affordances of that particular identity. In this way each person can learn about the valued attributes, qualities and roles of different groups in society – as boys or girls, mothers, wives, husbands or elephant hunters.

The sound environment of the BaYaka

In the dense undergrowth characteristic of the Central African forest of the BaYaka it is often difficult to see much further than a few metres in front of you. With foliage limiting visibility, listening tells you what is happening nearby. When you see something, such as a charging buffalo, it is probably too late. Closing your eyes and concentrating on the sounds around reveals, even to the most inexpert listener, the forest's song: a cicada rubs its abdomen with its serrated legs creating a searing vibration so loud that it momentarily deafens you if you are too close; as it fades out, the deep bass hoots of a black and white colobus monkey announce the location of the group in a large fruiting tree; nearby a small bird puffs up his chest and proudly chirrup his tune, pauses, and then chirrup it again; in the pause the delicate *bobobobobo* call of a mother gorilla reminds her children where she is as she savours some termite larvae; and then the cicada's deafening vibration begins again. Each sound-maker repeats their particular sound at regular intervals, combining together to create a dense polyphony of sound.

BaYaka pay careful attention to this soundscape. They do not filter it out as urban dwellers do, but listen intently to all the sounds around them since they convey so much information to the trained listener. In effect, it is an ongoing conversation – to the Mbendjele the forest is ‘talking’ all the time. They hear when monkeys have seen pigs. When the bees start flying home it tells them to go home too. Frogs invite the thirsty hunter to drink. Such interspecies communication is not just human to non-human. For instance, duikers feasting on what monkeys let fall under fruiting trees are warned of an approaching leopard by the monkeys’ alarm calls.

BaYaka use their knowledge of these characteristic sounds to communicate back to the forest. For BaYaka, sharing meaningful sounds is the most efficient way of establishing relationships with a wide range of sentient beings in the forest from whom they want things. To ensure the sounds are appropriate to the sentient being concerned (and therefore meaningful), they mimic the sounds used by these sentient beings back to them. Hunters mimic duikers, crocodiles, pigs and monkeys to lure the animals within reach. BaYaka also mimic farmer’s languages and ape the farmer’s stereotypes of them to get things safely from the farmers.

And so it is with the forest as a whole. Since the forest’s song is composed of a polyphony of animal, insect and bird sound-making, so it is logical that if people want to ‘speak’ the language of the forest, they should sing polyphonically. By sharing music with the forest a relationship of care and concern between the human group and the forest is established. Since people who care for each other share on demand, sharing song with the forest legitimates any demands people make, so that the forest can be expected to share its pigs or elephants with people.

A BaYaka perspective on musicking

When BaYaka are musicking they say they are ‘playing’ (*bo.sane*), even when they are performing their most sacred rituals that call forest spirits (*mokondi*) into camp. This kind of ‘playing’ is so valued that BaYaka often talk about it and love to reminisce about past performances, using them as the basis for evaluating the extent to which neighbouring groups are ‘proper’ forest people like themselves.¹ I once played some sixty-year-old recordings of Mbuti music made by Colin Turnbull in the 1950s on the eastern border of the dense forest covering the Congo Basin to BaYaka over a thousand miles to the west. They immediately exclaimed that ‘They must be BaYaka since they sing just like us!’

Why should music and ritual be so preoccupying for the BaYaka and other hunter-gatherers? I argue that it is because they implicitly recognize that performing these rituals and their accompanying musical repertoires has pedagogic, political, economic, social and cosmological ramifications that serve to reproduce key cultural orientations they consider central to BaYaka personhood and cultural identity. If our informants are so concerned and interested in music and its performance, should anthropologists not be too?

To BaYaka, musicking is potent and productive, it has power. For instance, when they set out to hunt with nets, women alternate a sung vowel with a blow on a single-note flute to enchant the forest. They explain that this makes the animals feel *kwaana* (soft, relaxed and sleepy), so that they may be more easily caught in the nets. Before a planned elephant hunt, women sing *Yele* late into the night. While in *Yele* trance, certain women travel over the forest to locate elephants and ‘tie their spirits down’ so that they can be killed by the men. In the morning the women tell the men where to go to find the elephants that they have tied up. The general principle implied is that music enchants sentient beings, making them become

relaxed, happy and open. In the case of animals this makes them easier to kill; in the case of other people music makes them more willing to give things they are asked for.

FIG>4.1. NEAR HERE

Figure 4.1. The forest spirit Ejengi playing in camp. Painted by Mongemba, a paraplegic who enjoyed drawing and painting daily life in a pad left to him by my mother when she visited. 1997.

Spirit play

The prime site for BaYaka musicking is *mokondi massana*, literally ‘spirit play’. Complex, interweaving vocal polyphonies form what Fūrniß describes as ‘an intermingling counterpoint’ that overlaps with a percussive polyrhythm made by clapping, body percussion and drumming.⁵ Singing and dancing must be beautifully performed to seduce forest spirits (*mokondi*) into camp to play with the human group. These are the most appreciated and valued musical events of the BaYaka. The BaYaka’s neighbours share this appreciation, and all consider the BaYaka to be the most accomplished musicians in the region.

One of the most important venues for BaYaka children to learn ritual and musical interaction is during the performance of the children’s spirit play called *Bolu* (Lewis 2002:132–6). *Bolu* is a prototype containing all the basic elements of adult spirit plays. Like other spirit plays it involves a secret path (*njanga*) where the spirit is called from the forest by the initiates, in this case boys aged between three and eight years old. *Bolu*’s secret path creates a space for sharing secrets that cultivates the same-sex solidarity so central to BaYaka social organization. Meanwhile, similarly aged girls dance up and down the camp singing *Bolu* songs

A successful performance requires boys and girls as separate groups to cooperate and coordinate in doing different but complementary tasks. The girls build up the singing and dancing until the leafy cloth-covered spirit called Bolu is attracted into camp. Then the dancing and singing boys surrounding the spirit must ensure that the girls do not dance too close to Bolu. Keeping Bolu in camp makes people happy, and BaYaka say that this keeps the forest open and generous so that food will come into camp.

The basic structure of spirit play parallels the gendered division of labour, reinforcing the principle that a life of plenty is best achieved by the successful combination of gendered differences and gendered production (see Lewis 2008). Men call the spirit out of the forest to the secret *njanga* path and prepare it to dance. Women entice it out of the secret path and into the human space by their beautiful singing and seductive dancing, so enabling all to enjoy the pleasure the spirit brings.

This gendered pattern of productive interaction is reproduced in diverse domains, from producing children to eating dinner. According to folk biology, men must repeatedly deposit semen in a woman's womb for her to make it into a beautiful baby that she returns after birth to the man and his clan, who give it a name. Similarly, the raw meat that men take from dangerous forest animals must be cooked by women to be tasty and safely consumed to grow and sustain the camp. The principle seems to be that men bring things from the potentially dangerous outside to the inside, women transform the thing once inside by making it beautiful and safe for all.

When small children acquire competence in the BaYaka musical style they simultaneously develop competence in a particular social aesthetic of gendered complementarity and coordination. Since their performance leads to familiarity and competence in so many other domains of activity, spirit plays are perhaps the most important cultural institution of the BaYaka. This may partly explain why BaYaka identify musical

style, rather than language, as a key indicator of the extent to which other people are like themselves.

As BaYaka children grow, their participation in spirit plays forms them in very particular ways – most explicitly, during the initiation ceremonies, into the different associations responsible for each spirit play.⁶ Here, secret knowledge is shared. Among women this concerns catching the spirits of game animals so men can kill them, using ‘sexiness’ to educate, control and manage men, and maintaining fertility, childbirth and healthy child-rearing; men are concerned with hunting, honey collecting, travelling in the forest (night-walking, high-speed displacement, invisibility and so on), and making themselves ‘awesome’ – impressive, handsome and fearsome. It is primarily in musical contexts that different groups cultivate and communicate their qualities, claims and issues explicitly. In these ways participation in different spirit plays genders and forms BaYaka persons (Lewis 2002:124–95). Each joins the appropriate musicking groups as they move through life and so engages in these group-level ‘conversations’ celebrating the particular qualities of that group in relation to society. Through initiation, participation in specific dances and songs, and in the hidden aspects of these ritual associations on their respective sacred paths, each is able to explore the strengths of that particular identity. In this way, each learns about the valued attributes, ideal qualities and roles of boys or girls, mothers, wives, husbands or elephant hunters. The ritual stages, songs, dances, special vocabularies, secret lore and mystical skills associated with each spirit play constitute a major avenue for each new generation to learn from the wisdom of past ones.

BaYaka are explicit about the importance of performing spirit plays for keeping camp life good (*bonyε*) (Oloa-Bilola 2016), encouraging their performance if a few days have passed without one. After announcing to the camp that such-and-such spirit play should be danced, people are called by the initiates to assemble together in the middle of camp and, if women

and children, to ‘mix themselves together’ (*bosanganye njo*), physically by sitting close together, laying legs and arms over each other, and acoustically by intermingling their different sung vowel-sound melodies. Sometimes a phrase will be called out by whoever starts the song, but then the singing proceeds without words. Sometimes several different spirit plays are performed on the same day, and if there are enough young people in camp they may be performed every evening.

Musicking makes social groups apparent. These groups can be the children of the camp using their spirit play to claim things (mostly desirable foodstuffs) from adults in the camp, or the men expressing their solidarity to the women, or the women to the men. In these ways spirit plays regularly bring camp members together. Once in a while they draw neighbouring camps together for a special event such as to celebrate and feast on an elephant. Wider BaYaka society is only made tangible when spirit plays draw together people from their small camps dispersed throughout the forest to form larger communities. This aggregation is motivated by the pleasure of musicking in spirit play and the social opportunities it affords. In the dry season, commemoration ceremonies (*eboka*) bring people together in greater numbers than any other event. These large ceremonies are the most important social events of the year, at which marriages are arranged, news from across the forest is exchanged and old friends meet – as do old enemies.

There is much creativity and variation between each spirit play concerning who is eligible to join, the secret lore, the appearance and dance of the forest spirit, the songs, rhythms and dance steps of participants. But structurally, the spirit plays resemble one another – membership is through initiation (*bo.gwie*) to a sacred path (*njanga*) where a forest spirit (*mokondi*) is called and its blessing and secret knowledge shared in exchange for polyphonic singing and dancing (*massana*). The structural characteristics of this ritual system are shared

across a range of Pygmy groups speaking different languages and dispersed across western Central Africa (Lewis 2015).

Music identifies, frames and organizes spirit play. Each forest spirit has its preferred music. Changes in music mark key stages of the ritual and ensure that participants coordinate with each other. On another level, music establishes a special zone where participants can connect with their cultural history, mythical past and the reflections of those who came before, enabling participants to engage meaningfully and poetically with otherwise implausible scenarios. This quality of music is commonly employed in *gano*, sung fables in which animals are presented as persons in an undifferentiated society, and also in spirit play that have mythical implications. John Blacking notes that:

It is because music can create a world of virtual time that Gustav Mahler said that it may lead to the ‘other world’ – the world in which things are no longer subject to time and space ... There is freedom from the restrictions of actual time and complete absorption in the ‘timeless Now of the Divine Spirit’, the loss of self in being ... The virtual time of music may help to generate such experiences.

(Blacking 2000:51–2)

BaYaka make good use of this. *Ejengi* is the most striking example of this time-collapsing quality of ritualized musicking because it reveals to participants the deep connections that they have with their ancestors. In effect, *Ejengi* transforms living people into their primordial forebears who, according to mythical narratives, originally lived in gender-exclusive groups in different areas of the forest and were ignorant of each other (Lewis 2002:173–97). During *Ejengi* initiation ceremonies, participants return to these original gender groups. Over three days, ritual re-enactments take participants through the key moments of the mythical narrative

that established BaYaka society by bringing men and women together as they are today. *Ejengi* enables participants to enter a mythical space, a timeless 'everywhen' so that each generation can ritually reconnect with BaYaka deep history, to reforge the contract between men's and women's groups and re-establish society for themselves in a triumphant aesthetic outburst of polyphonic singing and dancing.

Ejengi's role in establishing contemporary society makes it the most important spirit play. This is demonstrated by *Ejengi*'s crucial role in the most significant group rituals of the BaYaka and local farming people: the lifting of mourning ceremonies (*eboka* or *matanga* in Lingala). After a period of mourning, the bereaved call an *Ejengi* ceremony to lift the mourning taboos and enable them to continue with normal life again. Farmers have to pay BaYaka whatever is demanded to do this for them. Only *Ejengi* can re-establish society after the rupture of death and loss.

Additionally, *Ejengi* is a realm in which male identity is elaborated, expressed and recreated for each generation of boys to discover. Being called onto *Ejengi*'s secret path regularly creates a public occasion to recreate the original men's society and demonstrate male unity and qualities. Here, men discuss important events, make group decisions and share male experience. The solidarity and coordinated support between men is demonstrated to the women in the way they control and handle *Ejengi* and the uninitiated during spirit play. *Ngoku* provides a similar context for women.

BaYaka songs often begin with a phrase or sentence and then proceed using only sung vowel sounds. The initial message is followed by an embodied message. BaYaka women decorated with flowers and vines dance *Ngoku* in a tightly connected group and sing in synchrony to collectively become 'Woman'. Their songs are 'Woman' speaking to men. So they sing things like 'The vagina always wins, the testicles are spent!' or 'Old men are no

good! We want young men!' These mocking, sexually explicit songs are a key way that women demonstrate and impose their power in relation to men.

Men, on the other hand, speak as 'Man' to the women by emphasizing brawn; male dances are strong, mysterious and awesome. Stamping up and down the camp bound together as one, the men frighten but also attract, making themselves desired but feared. This process of assertion and counter-assertion is the central dynamic maintaining the egalitarian relations between the gender groups (Finnegan 2013; Lewis 2002:195–7).

When people musick together in these ritualized ways, they talk as a group. A singing group can say things that no individual in the group could say without fearing repercussions. Strong, provocative, insulting or political statements can be made without giving the intended recipients space to respond. This allows tensions to be expressed and acknowledged without the necessity of resolution. The implicit principle is that when many people speak at once their message is incoherent, and the language may not even be understood. But if many sing together their message is reinforced, and repetition sends the message more strongly rather than tiring or boring listeners. In speech one body communicates; in music many bodies can do so.

Musical structure structures more than sound

Analysis of this distinctive and complexly organized musical style shows that its structure is based on repeated intermingled 'melodic modules'. Each participant's life-long apprenticeship during spirit play has ensured that this musical deep structure is so effectively inculcated that each singer knows how variations can be executed and when to integrate them into the song. When listening to the wealth of sound and melody this style produces, it is easy

to think that each voice sings randomly, but underneath a sophisticated musical organization constrains and directs innovation and creativity (Arom 1978; Fūrniiss 1993).

Michelle Kisliuk's ethnography illustrates the creative ways BaAka Pygmies in the Lobaye forest (Central African Republic) use music and its inherent structure to experiment with novelty (Kisliuk 2001). She describes how BaAka use musical performance to explore modernity by adopting missionary songs and other musics. Over time, they transform new songs such as hymns by 'elaborating on a theme until eventually it is engulfed in a flurry of kaleidoscopic improvisations, countermelodies, and elaborations' (ibid.:188), effectively becoming increasingly BaAka in style. This constant embellishment, variation and recombination of the 'melodic modules' is a regular feature of BaYaka music, creating huge potential for variation each time a song is performed, and leading to the creation of new musical repertoires and the extension of existing ones (Fūrniiss 2006; Fūrniiss and Joiris 2011). Kisliuk refers to this underlying pattern as a distinctive BaAka 'socio-aesthetic' that orientates people to engage with new environmental stimuli in a dialogic way (Kisliuk 2001:146–7, following Chernoff 1979). Through performance, BaYaka colonize the new, first exploring it in its own terms, then successively incorporating it, or discarding it.⁷

The music's deep structure enables, even encourages, great variation and creativity in its surface manifestations – as performed spirit play or song – while respecting a coherent deep pattern that remains mostly below the surface. This freedom within constraint enables each individual to interpret the deep structure according to their current predispositions, experience and needs. It is not a rigid or dogmatic imposition, but an aesthetic orientation that drives sound into increasing complexity and beauty in a uniquely BaYaka way. In this sense it manages to be conservative yet hugely creative and innovative. Musicking does not dictate cultural orientations, but rather familiarizes participants with culturally specific ways of

organizing themselves, shows them to be effective and then leaves it up to the individual and group to make them relevant to the current moment, or not.

Understanding how to participate appropriately in a song composed of different parts sung by different people simultaneously requires musical, political, psychological and economic training. Take politics for instance: anyone can start or stop a song – though there are particular conventions to follow. There is an absence of hierarchy among singers: no participant has authority over others. Rather, all present are expected to participate and give of their best. All must share whatever they can. This resembles the organization of camp life, where each is encouraged to join with others, but no one is ordered to produce. Whatever each does manage to produce must be shared equally with all present.

To create polyphony each singer must harmonize with others but avoid singing the same melody. So each has to hold their own and resist being entrained into the melodies being sung around them: if too many sing the same melody the polyphony dissolves. Learning to do this when singing cultivates a particular sense of personal autonomy, one that is not selfish or self-obsessed but is keenly aware of what others are doing, and which seeks to complement this by doing something different. So musicking encourages participants to cultivate particular psychological dispositions.

Acquiring musical skill primes participants to culturally appropriate ways of interacting with others without a central coordinating figure. The choices each makes do not need instructions from authority figures or explicit justification, since they are instinctive, based on an aesthetic feeling of what one ought to do to complement others. This aesthetic sense wills you to act, even though there is no force obliging you to do so. This is a key aspect of the unspoken grammar of interaction that is a central dynamic organizing daily camp life in a society where no one, not even parents in relation to their children, has the right to oblige others to do their will.

Musicking also organizes economic decision-making. Recognizing melodic modules in the music, then deciding where to fit your particular module into the interlocked rhythm, is an aesthetic decision that has similarities with the types of decisions people make when hunting and gathering. I observed how, as people walk down a forest path, they take great pleasure in discussing what they see and what it implies. In particular, people remarked on regularly occurring conjunctions of features that indicate that there is a resource to extract from the forest. Identifying these potential conjunctions utilizes decision-making skills similar to those used when successfully applying a melodic module at the right time in a particular song. For instance, a criss-crossing of narrow animal trails in leafy but relatively open undergrowth indicates the presence of duikers.⁸ In such an ‘environmental melody’, the melodic module to choose is to squat down and mimic a duiker’s call – and they come out of the undergrowth to within reach of your spear! Such cross-domain similarities between the application of musical knowledge and the application of subsistence knowledge are suggestive. Though the apprenticeship required for each activity is different and leads to the acquisition of different areas of knowledge (musical melodies and hunting strategies), the way this knowledge is deployed in daily decision-making has a striking structural resemblance.

These resemblances go further. The musically acquired aesthetic predisposition to sing a different melodic line to your neighbours makes for efficient hunting and gathering when transformed into an economic aesthetic: do something different from others. If everyone goes hunting in the same area of forest, there is a risk that there would be nothing to eat. Modes of musical participation are so intimately integrated into everyday life in these BaYaka communities that each person’s physical, psychological and social development has been profoundly musically influenced. In such an egalitarian cultural context, where explicit teaching is rare, these modes of music and dance participation are one of the major avenues for learning these cultural grammars of interaction. By learning how to join in the song

appropriately, each person also learns how to behave appropriately in other contexts. By regularly repeating this same process during performances over a lifetime, a particular BaYaka way of doing things is repeatedly engendered, almost subliminally, within each generation without recourse to authority figures.

To summarise my argument: musicking requires the cultivation of special skills that are useful in a range of other domains of cultural activity such as politics and economics. Indeed, the interaction between activities in these different domains confirms music as a central foundational cultural schema – since it is the primary source for propagating this particular BaYaka social aesthetic. It is not a rigid process but interactive and creative: the deep structure interacts with the natural and social environment, and peoples' characters and experiences, to produce an aesthetic negotiation which manifests as a unique sound and corresponding series of body movements, as well as a particular cultural approach to ritual, politics and the economy. That is why Mbendjele BaYaka listening to Mbuti singing their songs 1,000 miles away and in a different language could immediately hear the structural similarity and so exclaimed that they must be BaYaka too.

Conclusion

I hope this chapter has illustrated that dance and musical performance are total social facts. When carefully analysed they can offer a privileged window into the structure of foundational cultural schema, and how they influence people's everyday decisions and behaviour using aesthetic dispositions. Musical schema seduce us to conform to them using our aesthetic sense, enjoyment of harmony, desire to cooperate, curiosity and pleasure-seeking tendencies. Although the BaYaka case may be special for their high degree of musical sophistication, as

Blacking (1985, 2000) and Widdess (2012, 2014) demonstrate, other societies exhibit similar processes at work.

Meanings can be held within music propositionally (ringing church bells announcing a newly married couple), implicationally or structurally (expressing the joy and happiness of the event) or even symbolically (reflecting power relationships between church and people). The key is that musical meaning is diverse, interactive, situated, multi-layered and wonderfully stretchy, an attribute Ian Cross usefully labels as floating intentionality (Cross 1999).

Musically organized cultural schemas clearly resonate with multiple meanings. This enables them to structure long-established activities, but continue to be applicable and useful when things change. This flexibility is crucial for such cultural schema to be relevant over long periods of time, adapting to changing circumstances and new situations, providing guidance but not direction, continuity despite variation and a means of ordering and making sense out of novelty.

The combination of constancy in structure and style with creativity in output offers a partial account of why musically organized cultural schema can be so resilient. If they are to be meaningful for each generation then they must be able to adapt flexibly to new contexts and resonate across different domains. They have to be able to frame the way people act and think rather than determining what they do or say, otherwise they will not cope with change, and may be abandoned as irrelevant. A distinctive musical style does this very effectively – by guiding musickers to incorporate the new in familiar ways, so establishing a sense of continuity.

Music's role in the cultural transmission of enduring aesthetic, economic, social and political orientations is remarkable. The dense **interlocked** hocketing² of the BaYaka and other Pygmy's vocal polyphony may be many thousands of years old. Although BaYaka hearing Mbuti music immediately recognize that they are 'real forest people' like themselves, genetic studies suggest that they separated around 25,000 years ago (Verdu 2014). Victor Grauer (2007) takes this even further, suggesting that this unique and distinctive musical style common to only San Bushman groups and Central African Pygmies goes back to the time when they were the same people. Although Olivier and Fūrniiss (1999) dispute the musical similarity, genetic studies by Chen *et al.* (2000) suggest that 'Biaka Pygmies' (BaYaka) and the !Kung San exhibit a set of related haplotypes that are closest to the root of human mtDNA phylogeny.⁹ From this Grauer infers that the similar musical styles of the two groups may well date to at least the time of their divergence from the same population: at least 76,000 years ago, but possibly as much as 102,000 years ago (Grauer 2007:6).

Today, among Pygmies in Central Africa, music is more important to identity than language. Now they all speak languages structured in similar ways to those of significant non-Pygmy neighbours – Baka speak an Oubangian language, Mbendjele a Bantu one – yet they insist that they are all BaYaka people. This accords with genetic and historical studies (Bahuchet 1996 Verdu 2014), suggesting that they were once the same people.

Maybe part of the explanation for why many observers remark that the BaYaka and other Pygmy groups are in cultural decline is because they look at the products of culture rather than the cultural processes by which these products emerge. The Pygmy tradition characterized by participation in these polyphonic singing rituals is an aesthetic orientation that frames the way people act and think rather than determining what they do or say. It is not

² Hocketing refers to the device of alternating between parts, single notes, or groups of notes between singers in multipart music. The result is a more or less continuous flow of sound.

a rigid or dogmatic imposition but an aesthetic orientation that drives sound and behaviour into an increasingly distinctive Pygmy style. Their fractal-like musical aesthetic is as much of a social, political and economic aesthetic as it is a sonic one. Music cultivates aesthetic tendencies that unfold into varied domains of life. Musicking familiarizes participants with culturally specific ways of organizing themselves and understanding the world, shows them to be effective, and then leaves it up to the individual and group to make them relevant to the current moment, or not.

According to Herbert Spencer (1868) and others after him, society musicks as a means to explore its highest ideals, to manifest and celebrate its most cherished values. In the Mbendjele and wider BaYaka case, and probably for many other non-industrialized peoples, the evidence suggests that musicking transmits, structures and maintains society remarkably well, and sometimes over remarkable periods of time. Anthropology would do well by attending to it more carefully.

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Notes

¹ Rouget re-proposed the verb *musiquer* (Rouget 1980:155), following its long abandonment after Diderot's and Rousseau's use of the term. In the American translation of Rouget's book (Rouget 1985), *musiquer* is rendered as 'to musicate', a term which has never taken off. Not until Small (1996, 1998) introduced it as 'musicking' did the term become widely used in the anglophone world (Rouget 2004:27).

² Though the phrase 'total social fact' was first coined by Maurice Leenhardt, the term became well-known when Marcel Mauss used it to describe gifts.

³ The BaYaka are also referred to as BaMbendjele and number some 15,000 to 20,000 individuals occupying remote forest in northern Congo and the border area of Central African Republic. Since it is easier for English speakers to pronounce and remember 'BaYaka', I use this more encompassing term. In Mbendjee, 'BaYaka' encompasses all Central African hunter-gatherers in a similar way to the academic term 'Pygmy'.

⁴ For relevant analyses, see esp. Arom (1978, 1985, 1994), Arom and Dehoux (1978), Bahuchet (1995), Suanne Fürniss (1993, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2012), Fürniss and Joiris (2011) and Kisliuk (2001); see also Lomax (1962).

⁵ Suanne Fürniss, personal communication, 2010.

⁶ In my research area there are over twenty different spirit plays. Tsuru (1998) counted more than fifty different spirit plays (called *me*) among Baka Pygmies along a 200 kilometre stretch of road in Cameroon.

⁷ Cathryn Townsend (2015) describes how Baka Pygmies in Cameroon are exploring 'development' by performing nightclub-like ceremonies as a way to explore opportunities for capturing benefits from rapid industrialization in their local area. In this case it is failing,

since it so transforms gender relations and cultivates rampant alcoholism that it is devastating the community.

⁸ Duikers are small, tasty antelope-like animals. Different species range from the size of a hare to that of a small deer.

⁹ A haplotype (also known as a genetic signature) is a set of markers (polymorphisms) on a single chromosome that tend to be inherited together from a single parent.