

A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Significance of Music and Dance to Culture and Society

Insight from BaYaka Pygmies

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Abstract

The concepts associated with what English speakers recognize as music and dance are not shared cross-culturally. In some societies there are no general terms for music and dance; instead, specific names describe different performances that involve music and dance. In other societies the same word is used to refer to music-making, singing, dancing, and often to ceremony or ritual as well. Despite such differences, every social group has its music, and this music is somehow emblematic of a group's identity. This chapter explores how this observation can be explained from a cross-cultural perspective: What do music and dance do for human social groups? Why are music and dance so universally central to a group's self-definition?

It is suggested that participation in music and dance activities provides experiences of aesthetic principles which in turn may influence "foundational cultural schemas" affecting multiple cultural domains: from cosmology to architectural style, from hunting and gathering techniques to political organization. Such dance and musical participation inculcates culture not as a text or set of rules, but as a profound aesthetic orientation. Foundational cultural schemas may thus be better understood as aesthetic orientations that influence our everyday decisions and behavior by seducing us to conform to them using our aesthetic sense, enjoyment of harmony, desire to cooperate, curiosity, and pleasure-seeking propensities. Musical foundational schemas may have extraordinary resilience, and this resilience is likely due to their special aesthetic, incorporative, adaptive, and stylistic qualities that ensure continuity with change.

A Cross-Cultural Perspective

We may say that each social group has its music.—B. Nettl (2000:465)

In isolated places where people do not have widespread contact with other cultures, music may be fairly homogeneous across a particular society, even though it is composed of a range of styles for different occasions. As the result of frequent cultural contact and musical exchange between members of different societies, many social groups today have a range of different types of music which they have come to call their own. The Blackfoot people of North America, for example, say that they have Indian and white music, which Nettl refers to as “bimusicality” (Nettl 2000). His teachers in Persian classical music claimed proficiency in many musical traditions, just as they could speak several foreign languages competently while still regarding them as foreign; this Nettl refers to as “multimusicality” (Nettl 2000). In large multicultural nation states such as the United States of America, different ethnic groups (e.g., Native Americans, Polish Americans, Hispanic Americans, or Italian Americans) use music and dance performances as a key marker of ethnicity. Cutting across such ethnic identities may be other groupings, for example, peer groups, which express themselves through musical affiliations to “rap,” “reggae,” “hard rock,” “country,” or “punk” and their associated dance and aesthetic styles. Between generations in the same social group there may also be different types of music: while my parents mostly enjoy “classical,” I tend toward “world,” but my son enjoys “jazz.” We all have our own favorite type of music, which is somehow indicative of the sort of person we are and where we are “at.” In this chapter I attempt to unravel how music and dance do this.

There are many kinds of music and dance, and many ways of conceptualizing of them. The concepts associated with what English speakers recognize as music and dance are not shared cross-culturally. In some societies there are no general terms for music and dance, but rather specific names for different performances that involve music and dance. When Japanese researchers first began to analyze dance apart from the specific repertoire to which it belonged, they had to invent a word for “dance” (Ohtani 1991). Seeger (1994) describes how the Suyá of the Amazon forest do not distinguish movement from sound since both are required for a correct performance. A single word *ngere* means to dance and to sing because, as the Suyá say, “They are one.” In Papua New Guinea, anthropologists have struggled to talk with their informants about dance independently of music. As in most of the local languages, the lingua franca, *Tok Pisin*, has one term *singsing* that is used interchangeably to refer to singing or dancing, or both. The Blackfoot term *saapup* rolls music, dance, and ceremony into one (Nettl 2000:466).

While this conflation by people in other cultures could be interpreted as lacking sophistication, it actually offers a profound insight into the nature of music. To appreciate why requires us to consider our ethnocentric biases. It

helps to begin with language. Those of us who have experienced the training required for literacy tend to prioritize words as the containers of meaning in an act of communication. By contrast, many people with no education in literacy tend to think of words as just one part of the exchange between people engaged in communication. To understand what is being communicated, they, like us when we are in conversation, pay a great deal of attention to gesture, pantomime, and body language as well as to the context of the conversation, the social relationships between speakers as well as their personal and cultural histories. As a result of schooling in reading and writing, we tend to ignore these less easily documented aspects of the “message” and give priority to the words exchanged in our representations of an act of communication.

Some researchers avoid this. Kendon, for example, uses audiovisual recordings of conversations to make microanalyses of the relationship between speech and body movement (Kendon 1972, 1980). He, like others (e.g., McNeill 1985, 1992; Schegloff 1984), have found that speech and gesture are produced together and should therefore be considered as two aspects of a single process: “Speakers combine, as if in a single plan of action, both spoken and gestural expression” (Kendon 1997:111). Kendon further notes that gestures may have a morphology and show, to a limited extent, at least some compositionality (Kendon 1997:123). Furthermore, there is a tendency for the gesture phrase to begin before the spoken phrase to which the gesture is contributing semantic information, thereby indicating their mutual co-construction in the mind of the speaker. While there is historical and cultural variation in the extent to which gesture is cultivated or restrained in conversation, gesture in speech is a human universal.

As sign languages illustrate, the language faculty is multimodal. Speech is but one mode. Language’s “ecological niche” (see Levinson, this volume) includes speech and gesture in a face-to-face interaction between two people raising and lowering their voices, anticipating each other’s utterances, reading subtle facial expressions and body language, attributing intentions to each other, timing their interjections, and turn-taking. These two people have a history between them that contains cultural and ideological elements central to interpreting the meaning that emerges from their communicative interaction. Our focus on speech abstracted from language’s ecological niche is an artifice of writing. Has our ability to write music or to record and listen again to the sounds of a musical performance independently of its production blinkered us to the full context of musical production, and has this led us to focus on the sounds of “music” to the exclusion of other aspects?

The relationship between music and dance parallels that between speech and gesture. Just as speech is composed of linguistic and gestural components, music necessarily includes a gestural component—a rhythmical movement of the body we call “dance,” or “percussion,” or the “playing” an instrument. Music, like language, is multimodal. Many deaf people, for instance, enjoy dancing by feeling the rhythm in their bodies. Just as there can be language

without speech, there can be music without sound. Musical behavior can be expressed through voice or other body movements that range from simple swaying to dancing, or from percussive tapping, stamping, or clapping to the skillful manipulation of purpose-built objects such as drums, flutes, violins, or pianos. Evidence from neuroimaging shows that attentive listening to musical sounds engages, to a certain extent, aspects of the action system in the brain (Brown and Martinez 2007; Grahn and Brett 2007; Janata et al. 2002b). In effect, whenever we attend to music, our bodies prepare to dance. Kubik (1979:228) put it succinctly: “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.”

From an anthropological perspective, musical, like linguistic, meaning emerges from its total context—one that includes the sounds, body movements, and symbols as well as the “who,” “where,” “why,” “when,” and “how” of its performance. To understand and appreciate a musical moment, much may be involved: the social relations of the musicians and other participants, the staging of their performance, the choice of venue and songs, the music’s tempo and structural characteristics, the atmosphere of the occasion, the emotional entrainment that occurs between participants, the smells, the colors of costumes or decorations, the moves of the dancers, the resonance of symbolic connections made to myth, religious ideology, environment or ordinary life, and so on. This wealth of information is nonetheless absent in the musical notation that represents the music being performed and is only partially represented in audio or film recordings.

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 written music, in conjunction with increased musical specialization in our own society, has made the idea of musical appreciation being separate from its performance seem normal to European or American scientists. From a cross-cultural and historical perspective, this is an anomaly. Extracting “music” from the social context of performance is to miss the point of music. As Levinson (this volume) observes, “the motivation for and structural complexity of music may have its origins in joint action rather than in abstract representations or solitary mentation.”

Meaning and Function in Music

The most common Western folk theory to account for musical meaning and function emphasizes its role in expressing sentiment and nonverbal ideals. This view continues to underpin many of the theoretical approaches taken in studies of music cross-culturally. Often referred to as “expressionism,” it informs both social and cognitive accounts of the relationship between music and language and is based on the presumed distinction between musically encoded feeling and linguistically encoded thought.

Reality is more nuanced. Like language, music is a universal human behavior that combines gestural and sonic elements. Both are multimodal and, as Levinson points out (this volume), expectancy, prosody, and paralinguistics in speech and song are bridges between language and music. 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; 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); storytelling, such as that of BaYaka Pygmies, combine linguistic, mimetic dance, and musical forms into a single communicative event.

Consider the fable *Sumbu a we* (chimpanzee you will die), which is found online in the supplemental information to this volume, Example 1 (<http://www.esforum.de/sfr10/lewis.html>). To “tell” this story, some voices narrate; others mimic the chimpanzee’s part, while still others sing the initiation songs. For an additional example, watch as Mongemba describes an elephant hunt by taking full advantage of a range of expressive modes, which illustrate the importance of both speech and gesture for eliciting meaning and are suggestive of the connection of gesture to dance and speech to song (Example 2, <http://www.esforum.de/sfr10/lewis.html>).

There are, however, differences. Music tends to *formulaicness* (Richman 2000:304), since preexisting formulae—rhythms, riffs, themes or motifs—are cyclically repeated, often with slight variation or embellishment. Music thus 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. Where language is based on units with fairly restricted shared meanings, music is constructed from units with multilayered, fluctuating, or no meaning. While both combine implicit embodied meanings (dance and gesture) and explicit sung or spoken meanings, music tends to prioritize the implicit and nonverbal, whereas language prioritizes the explicit and the verbal.

In musical contexts, extracting meaning from what is predominantly nonverbal presents a methodological problem. Using words to discuss a sequence of mostly nonverbal sounds and actions is challenging since the meanings contained within are performed nonverbally precisely because they are most effectively transmitted in this way. Music and dance “generate certain kinds of social experience that can be had in no other way...Perhaps, like Levi-Strauss’s ‘mythical thought,’ they can be regarded as primary modeling systems for the organization of social life...” (Blacking 1985:65).

Feld and Fox (1994:35) typify some of these social organizational functions provided by music “as an emblem of social identity..., as a medium for socialization..., as a site of material and ideological production..., as a model for social understandings and evocations of place and history..., as a modality

for the construction and critique of gender and class relations... , and as an idiom for metaphysical experience.” Other functions could be added such as group communication, individual and group display, sexual selection, keeping dangerous wild animals away, infant and child socialization and learning, a framing for ritual, or a means to mark episodes or changes of status in ceremonies, or the suspension of normal social behaviors as in carnival or spirit possession. Music can also transmit meaning propositionally. For example, it can greet or mark arrivals or departures, deaths, births, and other events, or it can signify social status or announce changes such as a new king or a newly married couple.

The structures, practices, and meanings of music are culturally determined and thus the meaning, function, or significance of particular music can only be understood in relation to its structural properties and specific cultural context. While an exposition of these properties and context may permit the inference of meanings and functions to music and dance, as with any discussion of nonverbal communication, it can rarely be complete, definitive, or certain. The descriptions and discussion that follow must therefore be understood as approximations.

The Stick Dance of Bhaktapur

Early functionalist understanding of music in anthropology was dominated by Radcliffe-Brown’s theory, developed in his ethnography on the Andaman Islanders. He argued that an orderly social existence requires the transmission and maintenance of culturally desirable sentiments. Each generation is inculcated with these sentiments, which are revitalized in adults through participation in music and dance (Radcliffe-Brown 1922:233–234). Radcliffe-Brown’s emphasis on the importance of “sentiment” echoed earlier views put forward by Spencer in his article on the “Origins and Function of Dance” (Spencer 1857). Spencer suggested that, in addition to the verbal understandings and representations of the ideals of a society, the highest ideals of a society are nonverbal and that their expression is the basis of the nonverbal arts. If this is so, then how does the repeated experience of music and dance lead people to experience desirable sentiments and “the highest ideals” of a society?

Based on work by Maurice Bloch, the musicologist Richard Widdess (2012) perceptively connected insights from cognitive anthropology to ethnomusicology. Bloch (1998) argued that culture is composed of bodies of expert knowledge and associated skills structured similarly to other knowledge-skill complexes, such as driving a car. Such expertise is acquired, stored, and recovered in mainly nonlinguistic ways to be used efficiently. Drivers, for instance, can chat to their passengers while remaining in full control of the car. Here, “nonlinguistic” means that such expert knowledge is not formulated in natural language and not governed by rules of linear succession characteristic

of linguistic grammars (Bloch 1998:10–11). Instead, the underlying nature of cultural knowledge is more akin to the notion of “schema” or “model” in cognitive psychology and should thus be termed “cultural models.” Bloch explained that the Merina of Madagascar are constantly evaluating (as he now also evaluates) whether an area of forest will make a good swidden field for agriculture. This complex series of appraisals concerning vegetation types, hydrology, slope, landscape, soil, and so on takes just a few seconds. This is an example of expertly applying a cultural “ideal model.”

Bloch questions the reliance of anthropologists on the verbal explanations of their informants, because such statements are a transformation of nonlinguistic cultural models into linguistic form. Since the underlying structures of culture may be beyond the capacity of its bearers to formulate linguistically, Bloch suggests that what researchers are actually doing is selecting statements that correspond to aspects of these cultural models in approximate ways. They are able to do this because they have internalized those models not so much by asking questions as by participant observation. Anthropology’s characteristically long field research (18–24 months) provides the investigator with the opportunity of becoming an expert in the aspects of the new culture they are studying.

Widdess recognized a similar process that occurs during ethnomusicological research. Through learning to sing or play music—a complex skill normally transmitted by observation and practice, not language, and by taking part in musical performance—the ethnomusicologist becomes aware of the range of meanings that music elicits for people in the society concerned: “These can be located in relation to culture-specific concepts, functions, social and political dynamics and historical trajectories of music, as well as in embodied experience and metaphorical accounts of it” (Widdess 2012:88–89).

To illustrate this, Widdess uses his analysis of the meanings contained within the stick dance performed annually in the Nepalese town of Bhaktapur (Widdess 2012). He demonstrates, in particular, how the very structure of the music is related to culturally contextual meanings. The music during the procession is composed of two sections: A and B, which are cyclically repeated, plus a short invocation at the start, during section B, or at the end of the procession. Section A is typified by a slow 8-beat meter, whereas B has a fast 6-beat meter. Widdess maps these structural features of the music onto the following: The drum rhythm at the beginning of A echoes a seasonal song whose words express the affective meanings of the procession. The slow beat organizes a walking dance through the narrow streets with dancers clashing sticks every 7th beat. Once the procession of dancers reaches a square, crossroad, or open space, the music changes from A to the fast 6-beat of B, giving the dancers the opportunity to exhibit their energy and skill to onlookers. The invocation piece is played at the start and end of the procession, and in front of every temple passed.

The circularity of the music (from A to B to A to B...interspersed with invocations) mirrors the circularity of the processional route around the town.

This, in turn, is suggestive of temple worship practices being applied to the town itself and of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology of reincarnation and rebirth. Other aspects of the music's structure, particularly its elements of structural compression, can be seen as the sonic equivalent of local architectural temple and fountain styles, reflecting a particular concept of space as mandala-like concentric rings, where the most powerful divinities are compressed into the smallest central regions. The music and dance exploit this aspect of divine power by employing similar compression and intensification in the music's movement between the slower, but moving Section A, and the fast, but stationary Section B. In the chanted invocations, the dance is explicitly dedicated to the invocation of divine power.

The isomorphism between musical, material, visual, and conceptual patterns of meanings in the music described by Widdess were never verbally expressed to him. But, according to cognitive anthropological theory, it would be surprising if they were. Widdess argues that such flexibility in meaning in music is characteristic of what cognitive anthropologists, such as Bloch (1998) or Shore (1996), call "foundational cultural schemas"—cultural models that cross the boundaries of cultural and sensory domains, rather than focus specifically on one thing—such as what makes a good *swidden*.

Musical performances involve a huge range of potential meanings and functions: from the sound and structure of the music itself, to the social and political relationships it establishes among performers, to the way it refracts culture-specific concepts, history, or identity. As such, musical styles are promising candidates to illuminate cultural analyses since "the highly specialized, schematic structures of music, and their realization through performance in context...offer fertile ground for the discovery of cross-domain, nonlinguistic cultural models and cultural meanings" (Widdess 2012:94). The politically egalitarian BaYaka hunter-gatherers, whom I have studied in Northern Congo, offer an example of how such foundational cultural schemas can be uncovered through an analysis of musical activity, further demonstrating how music extends well beyond the realm of sound.

A Central African BaYaka Pygmy Hunter-Gatherer Perspective

When the BaYaka¹ discuss the extent to which other Pygmy groups are "real" forest people, they often focus on the extent of their skill in performing ritual. For example, in 2006 when I played some 50-year-old recordings of Mbuti music, made by Colin Turnbull in the 1950s on the eastern border of the dense

¹ They are also referred to as Mbendjele and number some 15,000–20,000 individuals occupying around five million hectares of 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. Mbendjele use it to refer to all Central African hunter-gatherers in a similar way to the academic term "Pygmy."

forest covering the Congo Basin, to BaYaka friends over a thousand miles to the west, they immediately exclaimed: “They must be BaYaka since they sing just like us!” To grasp this requires a better understanding of what music means to BaYaka people and their culture, as well as what they do with it.

To the BaYaka, music is potent and productive; it has power. When the BaYaka set out to net-hunt, for example, 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 tired—so that they may be more easily caught in the nets. Before a planned elephant hunt, women sing *Yele* late into the night. Extended mesmeric singing and dance styles are combined with a secret drink to facilitate certain women to enter a trance. While in *Yele* trance, these women say that their spirits travel over the forest to locate elephants, and that they “tie the elephants’ spirits down” so that they can be later 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 and dance enchant sentient beings, making them relaxed, happy, and open. In the case of animals, this makes them easier to kill; in the case of people, music makes them more willing to give up things when asked. During large group ritual performances, this principle is used to acquire things from other people within the group as well as from outsiders, such as local farmers.

Such rituals are a regular feature of camp life and are called *mokondi masana*, literally “spirit play.” During a *mokondi massana*, people, and then spirits, dance to complex interweaving vocal melodies interlocked into a dense yodeled and hocketed² polyphony that overlaps with a percussive polyrhythm made by clapping and drumming. To attract forest spirits (*mokondi*) out of the forest to play and dance with the human group, this music must be beautifully performed. Although there are many other contexts in which people make music, spirit plays are the most appreciated and valued musical event of the BaYaka. Their neighbors share this appreciation and consider the BaYaka to be the most accomplished musicians in the region. In fact, the BaYaka perform the major life-cycle rituals for their neighbors in return for copious alcohol, “smoke,” and food.

The BaYaka have an egalitarian social organization of the type described by Woodburn as “immediate return” (Woodburn 1982). In a society where it is rude to ask questions (not easy for a researcher), rude to tell someone else what to do (men cannot order their wives, parents cannot order their children), and there are no social statuses that carry authority, it is often difficult to understand how anything gets done. Yet somehow, day after day, the camp spontaneously organizes itself to find sufficient food without an elder or leader directing people to act. People organize themselves sensitively in relation to what others announce they are doing, so that their actions are complementary. This

² Yodeling is a singing style that alternates between a chest and a head voice. Hocket is a technique in which singers sing alternately to complete a single melody.

apparent spontaneity forced me to look obliquely for clues and be sensitive to ways in which BaYaka organize themselves and transmit knowledge, without giving special status or authority to any particular individual. Observing the inability of egalitarian societies to judge new innovations, Brunton (1989) provocatively suggested that such societies are inherently unstable, their practices haphazard or accidental assemblages, and their continued existence fortuitous. Yet given the long survival of such societies in the ethnographic record, something else is clearly going on.

Elsewhere (Lewis 2008), I have examined how a taboo complex called *ekila*, based on the separation of different kinds of blood (menstrual blood and the blood of killing animals), serves to inculcate specific gendered roles and ideological orientations without reference to authority figures. My analysis of BaYaka music builds on this work and demonstrates another key way that the BaYaka learn the organizational principles of their society. These principles are rarely made explicit, yet consistently—across communities in widely different areas and even speaking different languages (Baka, BaAka, BaYaka, Mikaya, Mbuti, Efe)—I have observed that many of the same organizational practices are based on *ekila*-like taboos (concerning different types of blood) as well as the common cultural institution of spirit plays (the primary site for the interlocked polyphonic singing style).

BaYaka Musical Socialization

To understand why a musical education can be a cultural one requires ethnography. This musical-*cum*-cultural inculcation begins before birth. As of 24 weeks, a normally developing fetus hears the world around its mother. Just as the pregnant mother regularly sings as she goes about her daily activities or when she immerses herself in the group of women singing these intertwining melodies late into the night, so too does her unborn child (Montermurro 1996). If the endorphins that this experience produces in the mother are shared with her fetus, as Verney and Weintraub (2002:63, 159) claim, powerful associations between the sounds heard and pleasure are established *in utero*. This prenatal acoustic and emotional reinforcement would be very effective at inculcating both the desire to participate in singing and the development of a knowledge base for later use.

Regular immersion in the rhythm and melodies of BaYaka polyphony continues after birth as the baby is sung lullabies, or dances along on the mother's back, or sits in her lap when the women sing together in a tight group of intertwined bodies as the forest spirits are enticed into camp. During performances, mothers often "dance" small babies by exploiting their standing reflex long before they can walk. The baby's motor development for dancing is encouraged together with its rhythmic and vocal development. Any infant or small child that makes an attempt at musical performance is immediately

praised and encouraged to continue regardless of the quality of their performance. Women's daily activities are often musically coordinated, from harmonizing water baling when dam fishing, to the distinctive *Yele* yodels that are sung as women move around the forest looking for food (Example 3, <http://www.esforum.de/sfr10/lewis.html>). As such, these activities provide frequent opportunities for children to engage in musical play.

Whenever babies or infants cry excessively, their caregiver begins yodeling louder than the baby and often firmly pats a percussive rhythm on their back. This action is surprisingly effective in quieting even the most distraught baby and reinforces the association of the melodies with comfort and homeliness. The frequency with which I have observed babies and infants experiencing this intense musical involvement—literally having these melodies and rhythms drummed into the prelinguistic body—suggests that it might be an important element of musical development. It seems to institute a process that ensures the development of fine musical skills and a keen sense of rhythm necessary for later participation in this sophisticated singing style.

Such implicit learning is tested as soon as infants begin to walk and participate more independently in music making. Sitting next to its mother or further away with other children, an infant begins to fine-tune its listening skills as it mimics what it hears. In this manner, children progressively acquire the repertoire of formulas that must be used to participate appropriately in the polyphony in the absence of explicit instruction. This imitation is actively encouraged with praise and so the infant is further stimulated to participate. Explicit intergenerational teaching is rare, though it does happen. Instead, peer group imitation is the major avenue for the transmission of key skills.

While there is no general word for music in BaYaka, *massana* encompasses what we would recognize as musical activities, but it also refers to any type of cooperative, playful activity. Ritual song and dance styles are generically referred to as *eboka*, each with a specific name, and BaYaka differentiate between the verbs to sing (*bo.yemba*), to dance (*bo.bina*), and to play/do ritual (*bo.sane*). *Massana* includes any activity that involves groups of children cooperating to have fun and can range from casual play to structured role-play games, to spirit-play (*mokondi massana*) ritual performances. During *Massana*, the children (or accompanying adults) summon mysterious forest spirits into camp to bless them with joy, laughter, food, and health (for further information, see Lewis 2002:124–195). *Massana* extends the social nexus of music and dance to one that encompasses cooperation, play, mime, speech, and ritual.

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 2002:132–136). *Bolu* leads directly into adult spirit play. It is like a prototype, containing all the basic elements of adult spirit plays, including its own forest spirit (*Bolu*) and secret area (*njangga*) to which the spirit is called from the forest by the initiates; in this case, boys between the

ages of three to eight years old. *Bolu*'s secret area creates a space for sharing secrets, which cultivates the same-sex solidarity so central to BaYaka culture and 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 singing and dancing is built up until the leafy, cloth-covered spirit, called *Bolu*, is attracted into camp. The dancing and singing boys must then ensure that the girls do not dance too close to the *Bolu* spirit. Keeping *Bolu* in camp makes people happy, and this keeps the forest open and generous so that food will come.

Although not explicitly stated, the basic structure of spirit plays involving both sexes (a minority are gender exclusive) mirrors the gendered division of labor, thus reinforcing the principle that a life of plenty is best achieved through the successful combination of gendered differences and gendered production. Men call the spirit out of the forest to the secret *njanga* area and prepare it to dance. Women entice it out of the secret area and into the human space by their beautiful singing and seductive dancing, thus enabling all to enjoy the euphoria that the spirit brings. This gendered pattern of interaction resonates with gendered productive activities in diverse domains: from making children to eating dinner (for a more detailed account, see Lewis 2008). Men say they must repeatedly deposit semen in a woman's womb for her to make it into a beautiful baby, which she then returns after birth to the man and his clan, who give it a name. Men take raw meat from dangerous forest animals and it is cooked by women in order for it to be tasty and safely consumed to sustain the camp. The principle seems to be that men bring things from the outside to the inside; once inside, women transform the thing by making it beautiful and safe for all.

Acquiring competence in the BaYaka musical style simultaneously provides the small children the context for developing competency in a particular style of gendered coordination. As Blacking (1985:64–65) astutely observed: "Movement, dance, music and ritual can usefully be treated as modes of communication on a continuum from the non-verbal to the verbal. All four modes can express ideas that belong to other spheres of human activity: social, political, economic, religious and so on." Spirit plays are perhaps the most important cultural institution of the BaYaka, since their performance leads to familiarity and competence in so many other domains of activity.

Mokondi Massana: Spirit Plays

The performance of spirit plays forms BaYaka persons in very particular ways, most explicitly during the initiation ceremonies into the secret society

responsible for each of the spirit plays.³ Each has its sacred path, secret lore, and defined group of initiates responsible for preparing the spirit play and calling the spirit out of the forest. In these secret societies, hidden knowledge is shared: among women, this involves catching the spirits of game animals so men can kill them, using “sexiness” to control and manage men, and maintaining fertility, childbirth, and healthy child-rearing; for men, this concerns hunting, honey collecting, traveling in the forest (night-walking, high-speed displacement, invisibility, etc), and making themselves “awesome” (impressive, handsome, and fearsome). Only in a musical context will different groups communicate their qualities, claims, and issues explicitly. All these point to important ways in which participation in different spirit plays forms BaYaka persons (Lewis 2002:124–195 provides more detail). To support my analysis of music as a foundational cultural schema, let us examine some of the underlying principles.

BaYaka are explicit about the importance of performing spirit plays and will encourage 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 “mix themselves together” (*bosanganye njo*) both physically, by laying legs and arms over each other, and acoustically, by interlocking their different sung vowel-sound melodies. Arom (1978:24) refers to this as “pure” music since the songs rarely have words. To get an idea of this style, a video of two young women singing *Maolbe* is provided (Example 4, <http://www.esforum.de/sfr10/lewis.html>). 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.

From time to time during the dense polyphony of spirit play, some participants (male or female) stand up to clown and dance. Often BaYaka will criticize singers who are not singing energetically enough or those who sit apart from others or who are chatting or sleeping. When things are going just right, they might shout “Great joy of joys!” (*bisengo!*), “Just like that!” (*to bona!*), “Again! Again!” (*bodi! bodi!*), “Take it away!” (*tomba!*), or “Sing! Dance!” (*pia massana!*).

Established spirit plays have special, mostly secret, vocabularies for congratulating moments of fine performance. There is much creativity and variation in the details of 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. Structurally, however, spirit plays resemble one another: membership is through initiation (*bo.gwie*) to a sacred path (*njanga*)

³ In my research area there are over 20 different spirit plays. Tsuru (1998) counted more than 50 different spirit plays (called *me*) among Baka Pygmies along a 200 km stretch of road in Cameroon.

where a forest spirit (*mokondi*) is called and its blessing and secret knowledge shared in exchange for polyphonic interlocked hocketed singing and dancing (*massana*).

The characteristics of this ritual system are shared across a range of Pygmy groups that speak different languages and are dispersed over Western Central Africa: the Baka and BaGyeli in Gabon and Cameroon; the BaAka in Central African Republic and Northern Congo; and the BaYaka, Luma, and Mikaya in Northern Congo. These groups form an international network of certain spirit plays across the region.

During these rituals different groups form to animate, organize, and perform the spirit plays. These groups can be comprised of the children from the camp, who sometimes use their songs to claim things (mostly desirable foods) from adults in the camp, or the men as they express their solidarity to the women, or the women to the men. Other performances involve establishing communication between the camp and game animals, or the camp and the forest as a sentient being. Like other animists, BaYaka society includes the forest and animals around them.

Spirit plays structure the wider society by ensuring that small camps dispersed throughout the forest come together to form larger communities from time to time. This aggregation and dispersal of people is organized and motivated by the social opportunities afforded by performing spirit plays. From the smallest social unit, spirit plays regularly bring camp members together. Once in a while they draw neighboring camps together for a special event, such as to celebrate an elephant kill. In the dry season, commemoration ceremonies (*eboka*) bring people together in greater numbers than any other event. These *eboka* are the most important social events of the year: marriages are arranged, news from across the forest is exchanged, old friends meet, and so do old enemies. How, and in which spirit plays, you participate defines your age and gender, as well as the specialist skills you may have, such as animal spirit catcher or elephant hunter. Only during spirit plays (and particularly in their sacred areas) do BaYaka publicly offer each other advice or elaborate on the particular qualities and strengths of the group brought together by the forest spirit.

BaYaka songs often begin with a phrase or sentence to indicate which repertoire of melodies can be used, but then proceed entirely based on hocketed vowel sounds. There is an initial message followed by an embodied message. During the women-only spirit play of *Ngoku*, the united body of the singing women dances arm-in-arm up and down the central area of camp. As they begin a new song, whoever stopped the last song sings out a line—such as, “you are all our children!,” “let’s fuck!,” “we like young men!” or “the vagina always wins, the penis is already tired!”—to tell the other women which melodies to sing. Asserting themselves to their husbands individually in this way could be misunderstood, but as a united group of beautiful, sexy, but unavailable women they speak as “Woman” to the men (Finnegan 2009 expands on this theme). These rude songs do embarrass men and are a key way in

which women demonstrate and impose their power in relation to men. Men, on the other hand, speak as “Man” to the women during spirit plays, such as *Sho* or *Ejengi*, by emphasizing brawn—male dances are strong, mysterious, and awesome. As they stamp up and down the camp, bound together as one, they frighten but also attract, making themselves desired but respected.⁴ This process of assertion and counter-assertion is central in maintaining egalitarian relations between the gender groups.

In these spirit plays, different groups in society are able to define and express themselves as a group to the rest of society. Individuals passing through these institutions explore what these identities mean as they move through life. By singing as one, no individual can be held responsible for what is sung. A large group of people trying to speak as one tends to produce “a speaker”; otherwise what they say is difficult to hear. By singing as one, the corporate body speaks and is understood. BaYaka take full advantage of the possibilities for group communication that musical performance affords.

BaYaka explicitly use spirit plays to enchant those who witness them. They say that the beauty of it makes an onlooker “go soft.” Sharing sound with the forest establishes a relationship of care and concern between the human group and the forest. Since persons 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 bounty (e.g., pigs or elephants) with people. Such singing is not considered as spiritual but as instrumental—like a hunting technique. Similarly, music is used by the Mbendjele to enchant and make their Bilo farmer neighbors generous. All the Bilo’s key ceremonies are conducted for them by the Mbendjele, who extract huge amounts of goods for doing so. A full description would be lengthy. The key point is that BaYaka use music to establish communication between groups across ethnic and species boundaries, as well as within their own society.

The implicit principle is that when many people speak at once, their message is incoherent and the language may not even be understood. If, however, many sing together, their message is reinforced. In speech, one body communicates; in music, many bodies can do so. Spirit plays happen often, but the experience is quite different to, for example, the listening of music on your stereo player at home after work. Spirit plays involve energetic, intense, full-bodied participation (Figure 2.1) that requires you to contribute as best you can, and in distinctive ways that relate to both the spirit play being performed and the music’s structure.

⁴ Watching football fans chanting in unison, or soldiers singing as they march, activates a similar principle. I know this is well appreciated in conflict situations as reflected in popular stereotypes of “war dances.” The key point is that forms of group dance are very much about communicating as groups not individuals.



Figure 2.1 After fourteen hours of performance these young women are still going strong. They use their hands to clap out polyrhythms that accompany their hocketed and yodeled polyphony to attract forest spirits into camp. Pembe, Congo-Brazzaville 2010. Photo by Jerome Lewis.

The Role of Musical Structure in Inculcating Culture

Ethnomusicologist Simha Arom (1978, 1985) analyzed this distinctive and complexly organized style to show that its structure is based on repeated interlocked “melodic modules.” When listening to the wealth of sound and melody this style produces, it is easy to think that each voice sings randomly, but a sophisticated underlying musical organization constrains and directs innovation and creativity. Each participant’s life-long musical apprenticeship 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.

More recently, Kisliuk (2001) built on this to emphasize how creative BaYaka music is despite this rigorous organization. She describes how BaAka Pygmies in the Lobaye forest (Central African Republic) use musical performance as a way to explore modernity, by adopting missionary songs and other music. Over time, Kisliuk notes (2001:188) that new songs, such as hymns, are transformed by “elaborating on a theme until eventually it is engulfed in a flurry of kaleidoscopic improvisations, countermelodies, and elaborations,” effectively becoming increasingly BaAka in style. This constant embellishment, variation, and recombination of the “melodic modules” occurs within their own music as well, creating huge potential for variation each time a song

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is performed and leading to the creation of new musical repertoires and the extension of existing ones. Kisliuk refers to this underlying pattern as a distinctive BaAka “socio-aesthetic” that encourages people to engage with new environmental stimuli in a dialogic way. Through the performance process, Pygmies “colonize” the new, first exploring it in its own terms, then successfully incorporating it or discarding it.

What is fascinating is that the music’s deep structure enables, even encourages, great variation and creativity in its surface manifestations—the performed spirit play or song being sung—while respecting a coherent deep pattern that remains mostly below the surface. In this sense it manages to be conservative, yet hugely creative and innovative. 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 in a uniquely Pygmy way. I am not attributing causality to either the individual or the musical deep structure, but rather to the interaction of the two in particular life circumstances. Music does not dictate cultural orientations, but rather familiarizes participants with these 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. With these caveats in mind I will illustrate how singing an interlocked, hocketed polyphony has certain phenomenological consequences on people who do so.⁵

Participating appropriately in a song composed of different parts sung by different people simultaneously involves musical, political, psychological, and economic training. Anyone can start or stop a song, though there are particular conventions to follow. There is no hierarchy among singers, no authority organizing participation; all must be present and give of their best. All must share whatever they have. Each singer must harmonize with others but avoid singing the same melody; if too many sing the same part, the polyphony dissolves. Thus each singer has to hold their own and resist being entrained into the melodies being sung around them. 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 seeks to complement this by doing something different.

⁵ Interestingly, Blacking provides evidence from the Venda that the *Tshikona* polyphonic “national song,” which is sung by all, played on 20 pipes, and accompanied by four drummers, “is valuable and beautiful to the Venda, not only because of the quantity of people and tones involved, but because of the quality of the relationships that must be established between people and tones whenever it is performed...[*Tshikona* creates] a situation that generates the highest degree of individuality in the largest possible community of individuals. *Tshikona* provides the best of all possible worlds, and the Venda are fully aware of its value...of all shared experiences in Venda society, a performance of *Tshikona* is said to be the most highly valued” (Blacking 1973/2000:51).

Musical skill could be understood as priming participants to culturally appropriate ways of interacting with others, so that the choices each makes do not need explicit justification, since they are instinctive, based on an aesthetic feeling of what one ought to do. This aesthetic sense wills a person to do it, even though there is no force obliging them to do so. This is a key aspect of the unspoken grammar of interaction, which is a central dynamic organizing daily camp life in a society where no one, not even parents to their children, can oblige others to do their will.

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 have observed how people, as they walk down a forest path, take great pleasure in discussing what they see and what it means. In particular, people remarked on regularly occurring conjunctions of features that indicated a resource to extract from the forest. No one ever said this to me, but being successful in identifying these conjunctions utilizes decision-making skills that are similar to those used when successfully applying a melodic module at the right time in a particular song.

A criss-crossing of narrow animal trails in leafy but relatively open undergrowth, for example, indicates the presence of small, tasty antelope-like animals called duikers. In such an “environmental melody,” the melodic module to choose is to squat down and mimic a duiker’s call, so that the duikers 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 or hunting strategies), the manner in which 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 melodic line different from your neighbor (if too many sing the same melody the polyphony is lost) 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 Pygmy communities that each person’s physical and social development has been profoundly influenced by music. 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 the cultural grammars of interaction. By learning how to join in the song appropriately, each person is also learning how to behave appropriately in a range of other contexts. By regularly repeating this same process during performances over a lifetime, a

particular BaYaka way of doing things is repeatedly inculcated, almost subliminally, to each generation without recourse to authority figures.

In summary, musical participation 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 organizational similarities between activities in these different domains confirm music as a truly central foundational cultural schema, since it is the primary source for propagating this particular Pygmy cultural aesthetic.

This explains why music and ritual are so preoccupying for the BaYaka and other hunter-gatherers, and important when they want to know how like themselves other hunter-gatherers are. In the BaYaka case, they implicitly seem to 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. Music and ritual involve an interactive, creative process. The deep structure interacts with the natural/social environment and people's characters/experiences to produce an aesthetic negotiation that manifests as a unique sound and corresponding series of body movements, as well as a particular cultural approach to ritual, politics, and economy. This is why the BaYaka, listening to Mbuti singing their songs over 1000 miles away and in a different language, could immediately hear the structural similarity, and explains what led them to exclaim that the Mbuti must also be BaYaka.

Conclusion

Dance and musical performance offer a privileged window into the structure of foundational cultural schemas⁶ and their influence on people's everyday decisions and behavior. They do so by seducing us to conform to them using our aesthetic sense, enjoyment of harmony, desire to cooperate, curiosity, and pleasure-seeking propensities.

Such foundational cultural schemas have the potential to resonate with multiple meanings. This, in turn, enables them to continue to be applicable and useful when things change. Flexibility is crucial for foundational cultural schemas 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.

Perhaps the combination of constancy in structure and style with creativity in output offers a partial account of why musically organized foundational

⁶ The extent to which Pygmies represent a special case of this is unclear. Pygmies are clearly very sophisticated musicians so it is not surprising that culture is so musically influenced. In less musical societies, culture may be less influenced by music. Further research is clearly required.

cultural schemas can be so resilient. If they are to be meaningful for each generation, they must be able to adapt flexibly to new contexts and resonate across different domains. They must be able to frame the way people act and think rather than determine what they do or say; otherwise they will not cope with change and may be abandoned because irrelevant. A distinctive musical style does this very effectively, by being able to adapt to new circumstances without losing relevance or continuity. Meanings can be held within music propositionally (e.g., the ringing of church bells to announce a newly married couple, or their silence indicating something went wrong) and implicationally or structurally (e.g., expressing the joy and happiness of the event, or the quiet shame of public rejection). The key is that musical meaning is diverse, interactive, situated, multilayered, and wonderfully stretchy.

Music's role in the cultural transmission of enduring aesthetic, economic, social, and political orientations is remarkable. The dense interlocked hocketing of the BaYaka's and other Pygmy's vocal polyphony is probably many thousands of years old. Upon hearing Mbuti music, the BaYaka immediately recognized that the Mbuti were "real forest people" like themselves, even though genetic studies suggest that they last lived together around 18–20 thousand years ago (Bahuchet 1996). Victor Grauer takes this even further: He suggests that this unique and distinctive style, shared only by San Bushman groups and Central African Pygmies,⁷ extends back to the time when they were both the same people. According to the genetic studies he quotes (Chen et al. 2000), this was between 75–100 thousand years ago (Grauer 2007).

These studies imply that musical foundational schemas may have extraordinary resilience. I argue that this resilience is due to their special aesthetic, incorporative, adaptive, and stylistic qualities which ensure continuity despite change. As the recognition of Mbuti by BaYaka attests, the schemas survive, even when language, technology, and geographical location all change.

If, as Patel as well as Fitch and Jarvis (this volume) suggest, many of the same brain resources are used for language, music performance, and perception, then the claim that language and music are at either end of a human communicative continuum seems plausible. There are, however, also important differences; most notably, the way that language makes greater use of the left hemisphere of the brain and music the right. From the material presented here, one might speculate that music, because of its aesthetic qualities, may have special significance for understanding the way culture is held in human brains and transmitted down the generations. Language, by contrast, is more concerned with the immediate contingencies of current human interaction; music is adapted to long-term orientations that determine the aesthetics or culturally appropriate forms that this interaction can take. Though both are based on similar brain resources, music and language have adapted to provide human beings with different cognitive advantages: one set is biased toward long-term

⁷ This connection is disputed by Olivier and Furniss (1999).

interaction and cohesion of social groups, the other to the specifics of individual interactions.

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