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## **1. How did you first get interested in BaAka music and dance?**

This image is from the southwestern Central African Republic in the rainforest area. This was a dance that was to induct another group of BaAka into one of the hunting dances, called mabo. I videotaped it because I wanted to analyze it later. I was living with this group of BaAka because I wanted to get to know their music and dance as a learner. I really wanted to understand how the music was working socially, socio-musically, and to be able to try and do it myself. And it took quite a while for me to even understand how it worked. There's so much going on in the music. It's polyphonic, polyrhythmic, a lot of improvisation.

Polyphonic means many voices. Polyrhythmic means many rhythms. So you have layers of pulses going on at the same time, like [singing]. That's two meters at the same time. So you'll have phrases that are based either on one side or the other intermixing. And then there's also yodeling going on within this texture. That's one of the things that really attracted me to BaAka music. So it's structured improvisation. That I knew when I went there, but I didn't know how to do it. I didn't know any particular songs.

One day when I heard the song that you hear in this video clip [videoclip]. I had heard it many, many times, but could not locate myself in terms of how one would sing along to it. But after that event, I was walking behind a young girl who with her little brothers and sisters and she sang out this phrase [singing]. A light bulb went off. This is what's anchoring this song.

It was a very popular song. It was one of the newer songs which made it easier for me to get a hold of, because the older songs have even more improvisation. People will have main themes in their ears, but no one will be bothering to articulate it any more. So all you'll hear are these really elaborate improvisations, and if you don't already know the song, you'll just be dazzled but you won't know what to do. But since this was a somewhat newer song and a somewhat newer dance, people were still articulating some of the main phrases, like that phrase.

BaAka don't count years. They think in terms of a long time and a short time. So a newer dance would be one that had become popular within the past 20 years or so. This is something that's accelerating, because the hunting is getting more difficult. The place is getting hunted out, and

because dancing goes with hunting success, people are sort of trying out more and more dances. If that one's not working, let's try a new one. These dance forms come up from the south, from the Republic of the Congo.

## **2. What is the social context of BaAka music?**

So much of what makes BaAka music BaAka music is its social immediacy. How the sounds work and how BaAka sound aesthetic works, but also how to interact socially and be yourself. It's getting a certain sound into your head. And it's cyclical, so it's repeated and repeated and getting it so ingrained and hearing slight variations that are coming from your neighbors and then responding to those variations. And it takes time to get it.

I think of socially immediacy in terms of music and dance as being heightened interactive awareness where people know each other—usually it's people who know each other pretty well, often they're cousins or people who've grown up near each other—are singing and dancing in a way that is fully responsive and interactive. So everything they're doing is in concert with and in interaction with what other people are doing.

There's a point where there's a little girl sitting with a baby sibling on her lap and she is clapping in front of him. He's clearly getting the beat.

This particular dance is danced in rounds, so there'll be a set of songs that are danced to and then a rest period where people chat and regroup. There're also moments where, especially if there's a visiting group, some people might be reticent and the people who are organizing the dance will get people to come up.

They may not because it's a relatively egalitarian society. So people might be telling each other what to do all the time, but very rarely being listened to or followed. There's always a lot of discussion and argument before and during any dance event which surprised me at first. I was used to performance. And even in West Africa, it's all very disciplined and this wasn't like that at all. There'd be stops and starts and things would just be getting on rolling and then someone would do something and everything would fall apart and the thing would have to warm up again from the beginning. And that's part of the egalitarian aspect. I came to understand that, because no one else can really order everyone else around, there has to be a consensus before anything can happen which, when it does happen, makes it that much better I think.

That's why I was interested in BaAka music, which to me was the ultimate example of a melding of social life and aesthetic life.

I wanted to check what BaAka would think of my students' performance, so I took a recording on one trip and played it for several BaAka who were passing by. They immediately recognized it as one of their dances, but couldn't tell who it might be that's singing. So it was a little bit square, a little more regular than they usually sing, but they knew what it was.

### **3. What are the meanings of this dance?**

It's participatory at various levels. The people who are dancing in the masks, *mondimba* masks, part of this dance form called *mabo* and that is part of the efficacy of the hunt.

Only men can be initiated into this particular dance form, that level of the dance form, where they're dancing in the masks. It was never described to me on a one-to-one sort of correlation—if you dance in that mask, then the hunting gets better—but that's the implication.

There's one point where the women came and picked up the masked dancer off his feet and hopped around with him. Somebody did tell me that that was like the women coming back with a lot of meat from the hunt. But there isn't consensus about those kinds of symbolic interpretations.

And the idea that this is that the spirit of ancestors, the mask becomes a spirit of the ancestors, but that's also debatable. There's this tension between the “what you see what is what you get” reality and an “otherworldly” presence that is always being debated.

In this particular case, there was a group of BaAka who wanted to be inducted into this next level of initiation. And you can call it either induction or initiation. Because they weren't such good hunters and they knew that this dance makes them better. And they knew that the group that I was living with had this dance and had this skill, so they had approached this group to be inducted. I think it had been planned for a couple of weeks. They had to walk for about a day from where they were based to where we were living, and it's arranged by the people who are what's called *ginda*. *Ginda* is a master dancer, but you're a *ginda* of a particular dance. So if you've been inducted or initiated into, for example, *mabo*, you've maybe traveled to the Republic of the Congo to be initiated by the *ginda* there.

When you have more social status overall, you have more contact with other BaAka. Then the young people get interested in each other and you have more marriage ties happening. In terms of the social and the economic and the spiritual. This group was a little bit marginal in terms of the larger BaAka population, so they wanted that connection and have the latest dance and the latest skills.

There are dances, especially in the past, where people would recreate the hunt and do animal movements. I didn't see that among the people that I lived with among this generation.

I did an analysis, which is sort of a conjecture about the relationship between the dance and the hunt. One is that the hunt is performed in rounds. You set up the nets. You scare the animals into the nets. You relax and sing for a while. Then you set them up again. The dance has the same kind of ebb and flow. There are calls that people shout out to scare the animals and to communicate with each other in the forest. Men, when they're going off to a dance, will call out those same calls.

There are levels of initiation into these dances. And they're about clairvoyance on the hunt. There is a basic level that both men and women can be inducted into. They get a special mixture of the ashes of tree bark and other substances. To put this mixture into the eyes of everyone in the camp who's going on the hunt and that gets everybody one level up in terms of eventual hunting success. And then being able to dance in the mask. There's a third level in *mabo* which is people—the initiates—dance around in a circle at a special moment during the dance with trees, young trees or thick vines, tied behind them that they have to pull along. And that was the highest level. The idea was that they would have extra special skill in finding animals on the hunt.

But if it were just a regular dance where it was just a recreational event, and no one was being inducted or initiated, then it's just the leaf masks dance and the songs have nothing to do with the hunt at all.

#### **4. Are there BaAka dances specifically for women?**

I saw these women's dances. Not all BaAka have them, know them, but the group that I was introduced to did. I also was interested in it because of the relatively egalitarian society. I wanted to understand BaAka musicality, or the women's musicality and centrality in the dance, and how that would all work.

One is an introductory dance, which is a line dance in which there's a lot of negotiation because, especially near to the village, not all the women know the dance. So the ones that know it are telling the other ones. The men are all standing back and watching, and it was a big dance event. It's somewhat unusual to have the women be the center of attention to that extent.

It's a dance where the women form lines and dance back and forth in parallel or facing lines. They were very extra long lines. So there's a lot of negotiation that takes place. There has to be a

very sensitive connection between all of the people to be able to move forward and back, so that's an introductory dance. It's called *dingboku* and there's particular songs that go with it.

They have fewer parts than a lot of the other BaAka songs. *Dingboku* was an older dance and *elamba* is the newer dance that came up from the Congo. That's the one that I got inducted into. *Dingboku*, the introductory one, you don't have to be inducted. Anyone can dance it.

*Elamba* is more of a solo dance, so you can have several soloists dancing at the same time. The dancer wears layers of *raffia* skirts and does a special movement which is the special *elamba* movement. Actually, [she] first walks around to establish her presence in the space and then stops and does the movement. I was told it was about how a woman goes into the dancing space and she shows the people how it's done.

Basically to show her poise and self-possession in the face of a lot of distraction. Part of the dance is also to have people to come up and do little funny things around her. To honor her, to raise up her hand or to give her little gifts, press coins onto her forehead.

But she's not supposed to react to that. She is just supposed to keep doing her thing and relatives and friends will come and gather the gifts.

## **5. Where do the dances come from?**

I did ask where certain dances came from. For example, there was a revival of a dance called *njengi*. It's one of the most central dances. *Njengi* is an ancestral spirit and it's the name of a dance. A collection of ancestral spirits really. And it had fallen out of practice in the first few years that I was in Central Africa and then came back. It had been called *edjengi* and then the new one was called *njengi*. It gave birth to it. The steps are slightly different. There's some slightly different songs, but the style's the same.

There was a woman's dance. I said, well, where'd it come . . . Oh, it was given to this woman by her husband who danced this other dance and she dreamt it one day. These dances mostly come about in the form of dreams given by departed people, so people that the person who's dreaming knew who died give the dance, speak to that person in their sleep. Or not only the dance, but then the songs that go with that dance. So the kinds of origin, sense of origin that people have are more across the line from the dead to the living.

Certain BaAka have traditional ties with other groups, and they're not necessarily the closest groups. The BaAka in the southwestern Central African Republic were originally from further

south in the northern Congo as were their neighbors, the Bagandou people who are not BaAka. So they have ongoing ties with the people who still live in that region. The villagers speak a similar language, so the BaAka I knew had marriage and travel ties even though it was quite a distance. It was at least a three- or four-day walk to get from one place to the other.

There were at least a few people in any given camp, meaning a group of about 30 or 35 family members, who would either have been from there or would have gone there. So that's where most of the dances I knew came from. And then there'd be other areas that weren't as far, but where these BaAka would never travel to. They would have their own travel ties and they had slightly different dance traditions, slightly different songs. Sometimes when I'd travel, I'd say, "Do you know this and such a dance?" They're like, "No, but teach it to us." They're trying to, you know, use me as the way to snatch some dances from the neighboring group or some songs from the neighboring group.

## **6. What is the larger historical context?**

My first step is to understand the "now" and to go into whatever historical questions there might be from there. In terms of documents, the only things that are available are colonial documents and that didn't interest me much because the amount that the colonialists knew about BaAka life was fairly limited. There were some missionaries and other people living in the former Zaire who had written things, but they hadn't been living with the people the way I was or interested in what they were doing in the same way that I was. So those wouldn't have been of much interest other than giving insight in terms of how the colonial administration was treating local people, and how they were responding to that.

The BaAka avoided much of the impact of colonialism, at least the direct impact, because they were in the forest and they weren't followed. What you have then is oral history as people tell of their own stories. But, again, BaAka, unlike a lot of other African cultures, only think back pretty much one generation. They think in terms of their clan. They don't tell stories about the great, great grandfathers. There are stories about once upon a time when animals and people were equal and animals could talk.

There's a whole side of popular music in Central Africa that is related. A lot of the popular bands are from this region, and they draw on traditional melodies or rhythms and harmonic styles in their pop music. They have their own various ethnic traditions, but also tend to be attracted to the BaAka music for their own adaptation in the pop style. And then there's this whole other layer of being aware of the fascination that Europeans and Americans have with the so-called pygmies

and seeing that that's a way to get attention from the larger world.

There was an example a few years ago. Alonzo King's LINES Ballet Company, based in San Francisco, worked on what he called a collaboration between a BaAka troupe put together by an entrepreneur from the city who had sort of hand-picked a group of BaAka and who'd toured around with that group and then brought them to collaborate with this dance company. But there was such a gulf between how the BaAka were conceiving what they were doing and what they were being asked to do and what the ballet dancers were doing and what the choreographer was doing.

## **7. How do you teach students about BaAka music and dance?**

My preferred way is first to teach the song, at least that central melody. To have people try and sing [singing] and to feel how the beat would go [singing]. And if they're catching on to that, I'll add another part [singing] and put those two together. And then [singing]. So then when I play the clip, they can at least hear [singing]. And that that's the cycle, so that they can locate themselves first.

We'll do the basic polyrhythmic training, so that people can do more than one rhythm at the same time and once you can do it, then you can hear it.

So basically I have a two-handed exercise which teaches what's called a 2 against 3 polyrhythm, basic 2 against 3 polyrhythm, and you have both strong weak strong, both strong weak strong, both [clapping] and then [clapping] I have people put one hand on their chest [clapping]. I'll put it on my cheek and so you can hear the difference, so you go [clapping] and I'll ask people to say uhh with their weak hand, [chanting/clapping]. Then I'll divide the group into two [clapping] and have one group take half and one take [clapping] the other half so [clapping] so they can keep this one steady. This is too loud [clapping] and then to switch [clapping] and then have them switch more quickly so that they get it internalized. I'll ask them to walk when they're going somewhere and clap the [clapping] [clapping]. That kind of thing, so that's just basic training. So it's all levels of that kind of a training and then learning how to do the vocal parts and improvise with the vocal parts that will train their ear to then hear a musical clip or a video clip to be able to orient themselves when they hear it.

If it's a younger group, high school aged, it's usually important to say something about the fact that the women aren't wearing tops. And to mention that it's just like here if a man isn't a wearing a top, it's no big deal. BaAka don't tend to cover up, although at a dance, it's become fashionable to wear whatever western style clothing you might have. And this particular dance

event happened near to the village where BaAka had come close to their farmer neighbors to help with the coffee harvest. And in payment for that help, they would get clothing. So for a dance, people would put on all the clothes they had, sometimes three or four pairs of shorts or sometimes just the ankle part of a sock. One fellow I knew tied a bra around his head. Not to make fun of the bra, it's just it's something so he thought he'd put it on. So there's a whole different sense of clothing.

## **8. How do students make sense of BaAka music and dance?**

I teach this material in so many different contexts. If I'm doing a one-time lecture, I had people think about, first of all, if they'd ever heard so-called pygmy music before. And then having examples of when they probably had heard it and didn't know it. For example, Herbie Hancock's *Watermelon Man*. He had heard a field recording that Simha Arom had made in the '60s and really liked it and took that phrase. And I would teach this, a couple of parts from this particular song.

Often I would use this material in a course about ethnography and how you write about a musical context and field research. I would contextualize it in terms of my experience, thinking about issues of representation. The circumstances of the taking of this video, how I was feeling, what I knew, what I didn't know, who I knew, who I didn't know. And then issues of writing and how one can come to describe that which one has found meaningful in the ethnographic context.

I would first hope that they would notice what it takes socially for these performers to be doing what they're doing with each other. I try to always contextualize what we're talking about or reading about in terms of this postcolonial, neo/postcolonial moment that we find ourselves in. So depending on how this clip is being narrated, what context it's being presented in, I would want them to be really aware of that.

I let them take in what they're going to take in from it, sort of the way I did when I showed up there, and see what they pick up.

I like to individualize it. I pick out the people that I know and tell the students about those individuals. One of the most important things is to not objectify this group of people that are on the surface very different from themselves.

In our tradition of Euro-American teaching, we are sort of allowed to teach the music and not necessarily focus on what a particular context might have been. It's a hunting dance, yet it can be danced for recreation. You can dance for any number of things. It's about a mode of



understanding that comes through doing.

Social interaction—that's the most important thing in terms of the meaning to me. And then if the context of a particular dance form has to do with hunting success, then I can explain that.