

Autoethnography and participant-observation in a cross-cultural artistic research

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Abstract

Autoethnography and participant-observation were at the heart of this artistic research project of re-inventing new marimba performance by investigating the West African balafon music practice of the Bobo and Bamana tribes. The adventures of diving into the balafon world were led by participant-observation research design, and these experiences have remolded my self-understanding of being a musician as well as a person. The autoethnography is a result of operating a reflective model of “I”, in which the artist-researcher has changed from the stage of exploration to recognition to interpretation. Participant-observation is the tool that helps us to *submit to* and *engage with* foreign music practice, and our main task is to render the ineffable experience of performing the music and switching between cultures. We do not necessarily *become* an African musician and assimilate into their tradition, but one shall try to gain head-on experience through participating in the music culture.

Introduction

My artistic-research project was in pursuit of a different musical practice that had the potential to enrich the current Western classical marimba repertoire and its performance technique. I first targeted at the three possible ethnic origins of the marimba, and eventually I chose the West African balafon music from the Bobo and Bamana tribes as the primary research subjects (Yip 2018, 21-25).¹ The outcomes were developed in two forms: a reflective text on the ineffable experience of learning and performing a foreign music instrument and practice, and second, an artistic output created to integrate the balafon music practice into my personal artistic experience. These purposes sounded simple at first, as I—like most

1. Invented around 1918 by American instrument builders J.C. Deagan and U.G. Leedy (Deagan Resource <https://www.deaganresource.com/>), some say the prototype of the marimba was inspired by the African instrument, while some others claim the Guatemalan marimba is its closest ancestor. The ethnic instruments possibly inspired the West to build a new idiophone keyboard, but the wooden keys and the resonating system of neither the African, Guatemalan nor Indonesian idiophone match with the design of the 1918 prototype. Since the first half of the 20th century, the marimba was promoted commercially as a concert instrument for solo and chamber music works. One of the earliest showcases of the instrument was in the Century of Progress Exposition held in Chicago in 1933, when Clair Musser conducted a hundred-marimbist ensemble and performed his arrangements of classical orchestral works, like “Bolero” by Eustacio Rosales. In the 1940s, the marimba began to gain public attention as a solo concert instrument when composers Paul Creston and Darius Milhaud wrote and premiered concertos for marimba. Some later milestones in marimba compositions include *Works for Marimba*, a collection of marimba repertoire composed by Keiko Abe between 1982-1986 and *Method of Movement for Marimba*, the four-mallet technique manifesto by Leigh Stevens. Since the breakthrough in the 1940s, composers and marimbists have continued to push the boundaries of instrumental art using a wide variety of compositional techniques. Some of them have employed the techniques of the modernists and avant-gardists—serialism, 12-tones technique, minimalism, etc.— and others have adapted folk and non-Western elements in their music. Hardly any evidence of an ethnic culture was spotted in this contemporary history.

musicians and researchers—thought that taking some balafon lessons in Europe and surfing on the internet would provide substantial sources for creativity and analysis. Nevertheless, due to my limited knowledge of the genre, my first listening experience of the balafon was a shock. The ultra-fast tempo, the tuning, and the powerful, loud strokes of the instrument were mysterious and strange to me. I wasn't very inspired by the music at the beginning of the research, but luckily things changed rapidly after I visited Mali and Burkina Faso to learn the music over there. The participant-observation undertaken during the workshops with local teachers led to astonishing results and head on experiences. In this article, I will describe some of my adventures in diving into the balafon world, the qualitative research techniques of autoethnography and participant-observation, and how the balafon experience has coined my understanding of being a musician as well as my own cultural identity.

Autoethnography and participant-observation were at the heart of this artistic research project of re-inventing new marimba performance by investigating the West African balafon's musical practice. The project sought to describe and analyze personal experience, as different kinds of people/artists possess different assumptions about the world—a multitude of ways of speaking, writing, valuing and believing—and each idiosyncratic way of doing and thinking about research and art was to enrich the current practice and understanding. The process itself—or part of it—is the product of this artistic research. Autoethnography stems from two qualitative research and writing techniques: the rigorous theories and methods of ethnography, and the personal experience, anecdotes, and storytelling of autobiography (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Based upon the theoretical and methodological tools and literature of ethnography, I wrote down the autobiographical *epiphanies*—that is, the remembered moments that have significantly impacted the trajectory of my life, times of crises that forced me to attend to and analyze particular situations and solutions, and events after which life does not seem quite the same (Bochner and Ellis 1992; Denzin 1989; Couser 1997; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). The autoethnographic approach is made up of a reflective self-introspection of a participant-observer, observations of the cultural happenings, and numerous interviews with members of the cultures involved in this study—balafon musicians, foreign learners, and fellow Western classical and contemporary musicians. These personal feelings, experiences, and anecdotes were the foundation for the processes of describing and narrating the ineffable experience of music performance. Further, we continue to look at these personal experiences analytically and to compare and contrast them against the existing research literature (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Autoethnographers must also consider ways to resonate with others who may experience similar epiphanies. The personal experiences and anecdotes illustrate facets of the music practice and facilitate the understanding of the practice for outsiders. They reveal the cultural differences between the artist-researcher and the members (e.g., the balafon teachers and fellow workshop participants), interpret the epistemic, ineffable research objects and events that occurred, and crystallize the process of becoming—the transformation of oneself while traveling between different cultural worlds.

Diving into the balafon music practice: learning with the balafon musicians

The first workshop took place in a small village called Konsankuy in Mali in January 2012. Not even shown on the map, Konsankuy is a small village located in south-east Mali. After flying to Bamako, the capital city of Mali, we traveled by bus for about eight hours (731 kilometers) to Sokoura and then walked two kilometers to Konsankuy. The second workshop occurred

one year later in Bobo Dioulasso, the second biggest city of Burkina Faso, where Youssouf Keita's atelier is established. The music tradition of this region belongs to the Mande people, one of the most prominent tribes in Mali, and the music we learned there came mainly from two tribes, the Bamana and the Bobo. The workshops were organized by Gert Kilian—a German balafonist who lives in France—with the griots of the village, Youssouf Keita and Kassoum Keita.² Including myself, a native Chinese living in Belgium, there were six European participants from Holland, France, and Switzerland in each workshop. French was the primary language we used to communicate with the griots, and Kilian was our translator when we had problems understanding each other. Besides the lessons of the Keita brothers, I also took lessons with other West African balafonists, including Moussa Dembele and Mandela, who practice a similar balafon tradition to that of the Keita brothers.³



Figure 1 / A photo taken during the workshop in Konsankuy, in 2012. Youssouf Keita, the main teacher of the workshops, is the person sitting under the tree (Credit: Adilia Yip).

Each workshop lasted twelve days, and the teachers taught us ten songs. The daily teaching routine was divided into three sessions: demonstration of the music patterns in the morning, individual practice in the afternoon, and at the end of the day, the teachers played the song again for the participants to film—both complete duo performance of the song and analytic demonstration of the combination of the patterns, i.e., superimposing pattern A against B, pattern A against C, as well as the melody against each pattern, etc. I recorded my experiences in two ways. First, I wrote in a notebook about my learning of the music and participation

2. Griot is the musician family of the village. They are the storytellers, historians, and praise singers who teach good morals and history to the villagers.

3. Moussa Dembele is an all-around balafon, kora and djembe player. He is a cousin of the Keita brothers and lived in Bobo Dioulasso in the same neighborhood as Youssouf Keita's atelier. He meets Youssouf regularly, and they often perform together. Moussa Dembele is now living in Belgium, and he visits his country on occasion. Mandela (Oumarou Bambara) is a balafon musician from Bobo Dioulasso who resides in Paris. I had some lessons with him during my second field trip, and he is an acquaintance of the Keita brothers as well. I also attended a workshop of Guinean balafonist Seydouba "Dos" Camara in Gent, Belgium.

in cultural activities, and otherwise made notes on the villagers' daily activities. Secondly, I filmed my teachers' lessons, their manner of explaining balafon songs, and their arguments over musical definitions and performances. In particular, I recorded the moments when the teachers were explaining—verbally and physically—the music patterns and the responses of the participants. These discussions revealed what the musicians would actually do on their instruments. Other interesting moments for observing the practice were, indeed, concerts, rehearsal sessions, parties, and work events that took place occasionally in the village or different corners of the city. The teachers and villagers organized farewell concerts on the last day of the workshop, which were excellent opportunities for the participants to meet and collaborate with balafonists from the neighborhood.

I am grateful to Gert Kilian, who was also my first balafon teacher, as he encouraged me to participate in these workshops to gain head-on experience of the balafon culture. The physical involvement—participant-observation—in the West African music-making practice was the basis for understanding this foreign musical practice. The experience of engaging myself with the local balafon culture gave me significant theoretical and philosophical insights, as such ineffable, embodied performance practice is seldom in the spotlight of an African study.⁴ Balafon music structures began to make sense when I approached them through performing and learning with African musicians. The experience also answered some of my central research questions: how do these African musicians think and perceive music? What do they actually *do* with their instruments?

I felt as if I was standing at the cross-point of two worlds: the world of the African balafon, and that of Western classical percussion. Such contact between traditions is more than a musical one. It is grounded in human encounters that require a thorough understanding of mindsets, traditions, rituals, languages, and social participation. For instance, the heuristic experience of learning with the balafon musicians has deepened my understanding of this music practice. Most obstacles stemmed from conceptual conflicts in the understanding of *music* between teachers and foreign learners, and communication barriers due to oral tradition. In contrary to the conventional Western practice of notation and written record, the balafon teaching, learning, and communication processes do not involve language, a naming system, and analysis. Music is transmitted through the imitation of the musical sound, and the physical actions of creating this sound (Foley 2013). In this regard, understanding the teachers' approach became the central topic in this cross-cultural research. My primary task was to resolve this problematic communication into a constructive learning experience.

In doing this, I copied my teachers' every move and put aside my original Western music mindset. Following every instruction they gave, I practiced and internalized the music patterns through repeatedly playing the movement patterns as if there was a language of bodily gestures. It was training for both motor and mental memory (Yip 2018, 148).⁵ And when my memory faded away, I watched the video recordings of their demonstrations to re-learn the sound and movement, rather than reading the transcriptions. This also meant

4. Kubik (1979, 221-250) discussed the perception of patterns and movement concerning the recognition of rhythmic and melodic materials in African music, which he called "inherent patterns".

5. During practice, the motor imagery of the music patterns offers us an intuitive prediction of idiomatic movement patterns. This process involves the consolidation and conversion of specific motor tasks into embodied muscle memory, which is also called motor learning in cognitive neuroscience research.

that I didn't transcribe the music into notation during the lessons.⁶ After one to two days of trial and error, the oral tradition learning approach began to take shape and yielded good results. This proved that the canonical Western practice of notation—practiced by my fellow workshop participants and myself earlier—is not the best approach to communicate balafon music. These findings were the prelude to deeper reflections and explanations of my balafon experience and were further attested, developed, and justified by ethnographical research theories, methodologies, and literature.

A moderate participant-observation approach

In the beginning, the research followed a classical model of data collection. It dug into percussion literature, African ethnomusicology, sound and video recordings of idiophone keyboards in West Africa, world music instrument archives and databases, and interviews with African music performers and scholars in Belgium.⁷ These activities offered me the basic knowledge of this music genre and prepared me with the necessary background information for my first workshop in Africa later on. Nevertheless, I was missing the experience of *being* in the balafon culture and *engaging* in the practice in the location where it lives to truly feel and sense the spirit of this music tradition. Participant-observation during the workshops provided that valuable head-on experience. Through *engaging* in the balafon oral tradition, musical thinking, holistic teaching approach, embodied musical movement, and social participation, I gained the phenomenal experience of sensing, thinking, and dreaming within this musical culture. I began to see how I, the performer-researcher, responded to the balafon music.

However, I would consider my level of participation as a moderate one (Schwartz and Green 1955, 343-53; Kawulich 2005). I maintained my personal view as a Western classically trained marimbist while following every instruction given by the African teachers. I did not strive to *become* an African balafonist since my purpose was to reflect on the process of adopting balafon techniques and practices, in order to be able to discuss the resulting changes in my own artistic perspective, leading to new musical creations. I even considered this as an advantage for this artistic research, because such detachment from the balafon has actually helped me to obtain a comparative approach. While rendering the experiential feeling (Biggs 2004, 11) of a foreign music practice, this research method contains elements that are made up of my subjective character. The manner in which I observed and understood balafon culture was dependent on my cultural background, temperament, personality, gender, and nationality. In other words, the subjective background of the performer-researcher is always present in participant-observation. I wouldn't be aware of my original practice if I was not confronting the obstacles of following oral tradition, just as the balafon musicians did not essentialize particular musical characteristics because these characteristics are part of their cultural background. My teachers—certainly not meaning any disrespect to me and my musical culture—had no intention to draw out or use notation during our dialogues on comparing Western and African music concepts. Despite having the experience of working with professional Western musicians in several projects, the balafon musicians preserved

6. Some transcriptions were made for the analytical purpose of this research.

7. I interviewed four European balafon musicians: Gert Kilian, Paul Nas, Rachel Laget, and Pieter de Zwitter. The interviews offered a primary understanding of foreign students' learning experiences and revealed how these African musicians teach their students.

their native musical attitude in front of the foreign learners, regardless of the difficulties they had in communication. I chose to respect and follow this specific teaching approach as much as I could since the core of cross-cultural research is also to reflect on the *prejudice* that apparently exists among all of us, despite which culture we belong to (Gadamer 2008, 9). Further, *prejudice* has guided me to distinguish and establish my own cultural identity, so that I can recognize the resonance and disagreement that emerged from the different music practices, that of myself and that of the other.

Nonetheless, there are concerns over the weaknesses of participant-observation as a research tool. Simha Arom (2010) questioned the efficiency and the quality of adapting to the native oral transmission approach in the learning process (Arom 2010, 96-97). According to the author, one problematic aspect is that when the researcher assumes he/she possesses a certain knowledge, they can reach presumptuous conclusions. Learning cannot make us an expert in balafon by tracking a short period, nor *changing* us into an African musician. I cannot reach the high level of my teachers only within these two workshops. The ideal situation is staying in *close* contact with the African practice, as would someone be immersed in it over a long time. Then, how should we posit ourselves in the music culture and interact with the practice? And what is the definition of *close*? We need to consider a *modus operandi* to access the knowledge and to work on an in-depth inquiry of our experience. John Blacking (1991), a prominent scholar in both African and Western music, unfolds his spiritual devotion to the Sub-Saharan music:

In the Sub-Saharan African music I learned, performance constitutes a scientific testing of one of the fundamental truths of life: all matter is a manifestation of spirit; in the process of playing, the process of allowing your body to submit to the musical act, you experience a sense of fellow-being with other humans and the world of nature. This is a mystical truth. In a sense, the experience reinforces all you have learned. The idea of possession has some relevance—playing Chopin and experiencing the spirit of Chopin (see also 1971). I am sure that many Western composers understand this without involving themselves in African or Asian music. Such was my block-headedness, my training, however, that I needed to find the key of African music to unlock enlightenment (Blacking 1991, 69).

I do not claim to have experienced the *spirit* of West African practice (whatever that may be). However, frankly, my balafon experience should be considered an interpretation of the culture's spirit. Blacking did not explain clearly what this state of being *possessed* is, but this statement made me wonder if I was at the heart of the balafon culture during the learning experience. John Miller Chernoff (1979, 3), a percussionist, author, and ethnomusicologist, gave me a way-out: my task is to bring *something* of a different order into our world of understanding, and at the same time, recognize and appreciate this culture on its own terms. This *something* is taking the actions of West Africans through the lens of a performer-researcher who has her individual artistic and life experience of the musical, practical, and cultural context of the balafon. The first layer in this autoethnographic endeavor is descriptive: I explain my personal experience of the activities I participated in and my interactions with the people and the environment. We care for the researcher's phenomenal experience with the music, the confrontation between the *self* and the African practice. It is the experience of how "I" dealt with every problem and circumstance when I was learning the instrument. The second

layer in this endeavor is interpretive: to make sense of *something* different from us by way of our own words and *tradition*. Our *tradition*, therefore, is stretched and adjusted to encompass these foreign terms. According to Chernoff, this process also helps us to understand ourselves:

In this respect, conveying my experiences with African music through the heritage of our traditions of understanding seemed to offer an opportunity not only to expand the relevance of what I had learned as an individual but also to indicate my sense of how those [my] traditions can respond to the challenge of such an undertaking. In such an investigation, we can learn as much about ourselves as about other people because we must see through our own eyes and we must find our own words to describe their world (Chernoff 1979, 3).

It seems that the real problem is not how long I might live in Mali and Burkina Faso, but the techniques I chose to render my interpretations and observations of the balafon music practice. The main concerns are the relevance of my personal anecdotes and the theories used in this context; for instance, mimicking what the African teachers do in the lesson is in itself an approach to understanding the practice. Imitation is actually more practical than asking the teachers to explain their thoughts and actions semantically. The manual to the music is comprised of movement patterns and gestures: I understood what to do before I could even think and talk about it. Thus, the challenge lies in finding my own expressions to articulate every relevant encounter and describe and express systematically the ineffable experience of playing balafon music—the music embodiment, the physical relationship with the instrument, learning by ear, and the experience of switching between two music practices. The focal point is the development of the experiential knowledge coming from the “I” in the balafon music practice.

Conclusions: the method of “I”

Looking back, this research was triggered by a few simple observations at the very beginning, which later turned into some inspiring open-ended research questions: how can balafon musicians create such intense energy in their performance? How do they obtain their bodily sensation and superb coordination, as if they were playing a *game* of automatic physical movement? The complex balafon polyrhythm sounded like a mass of percussive sounds to me in the beginning. However, once I had the breakthrough of understanding the music culture, the rhythmic structure gave me a sense of liberation coming from the natural, crude beauty and spontaneity that I always feel missing in Western classical music. Therefore, through exploring the resonance and dissimilarities between the two music cultures, I have left my comfort zone of Western classical music and earned valuable experience that enriched my original music practice. The experience also helped me to develop an autoethnographic approach of analyzing, revealing, and interpreting the experience of “I”—the artist-researcher situated at the center of the cross-cultural artistic exchange. “I” comprised three different stages of transition during my balafon excursion: exploration, recognition, and interpretation. First, “I” as an explorer of an unknown musical world, who observes and participates in the African tradition; second, in the process of learning the music, “I” becomes a different performer who embodies the balafon practices; then finally, the third “I” is the interpreter who describes the cross-cultural encounter. These roles appeared chronologically at different research phases. The first phase—the explorer—was embarked upon from the first

moment of the research project; it was the beginning of the intercultural music journey, a state of searching and recognizing what was different from my home ground. The second phase marked the emergence of a new artistic character, that of the performer-researcher's original thinking patterns and artistic practices being altered during the exposure to new influences. "I" usually enters the second phase without awareness, and begins to summarize the experience of the first two phases. Finally, the third phase seeks to communicate the experience of the previously unknown music practice. "I" interprets, analyzes, and theorizes the personal experiences, as well as the creative and experimentation processes that followed. Intermediate interpretations also appeared when "I" was still in the midst of understanding the phenomena, and concepts that were not clear were reaffirmed or revised when the researcher had gathered more knowledge about the subject (Yip 2018, 209-214).

In a nutshell, the main goal of artistic researchers is to render the experience of stepping into an unknown world and being *influenced* by this new world; the process itself is the product in artistic research. Just as the phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002, 206) has asked us to perceive the world with our body, we do not necessarily *become* an African musician and assimilate into their tradition, but we should engage mentally and physically in foreign practice to stay *close* to it. We must try to experience the music from within and strive for clarity in analyzing, revealing, and interpreting that experience. I hope the two methodological tools of autoethnography and participant-observation can further empower artist-researchers in the process of describing their experience, and continue to inspire us all in sharing reflections as we move forward to new and unknown artistic grounds.

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