



## Creating a Dialogue through Improvisation in Cross-Cultural Collaborations

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research paper investigates the role of improvisation as dialogue between oral music practitioners from different cultures and compares modes of practice between the subject of this research and other similar collaborations. Ideas for developing good practice through processes of familiarisation, learning and communication are discussed alongside issues surrounding musical identity. With regard to creative outcomes, an attempt is made to devise a model whereby cross-cultural collaborations can provide benefits to both participants and their wider communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

For several years, I have been improvising music in cross-cultural collaborations, specifically with West African musicians including master drummer Samuel Nkrumah Yeboah, Moroccan Gnawa master Simo Lagnawi and Gambian griot Juldeh Camara. These interactions have all taken place within the UK. As a result of these experiences, I have become increasingly interested in developing a methodology for generating new cross-cultural musical projects with professional musicians. By engaging with, and creating a dialogue between, such musicians the hope is that all collaborators can generate a better understanding of the structures and values inherent within one another's musical cultures. It is hoped that the resulting creative outcomes will represent that increased understanding, demonstrating an appreciation of, and a meaningful interaction between the musical cultures involved in each collaboration.

My role in this research is as an *insider-researcher*. This implies that much of the information represented has come about as a result of knowledge gained through first-hand experience and is therefore highly subjective. Some information is anecdotal, in particular that which resulted from my conversations with Juldeh Camara. However, within ethnomusicological studies today, figures such as Jeff Todd Titon (1997) outline the processes of *musical-being-in the-world* that are at play in this area of musicological research. This methodology emphasises the importance of immersion in a cultural activity. It acknowledges the importance of the physical act of music-making, modes of social interaction and actions that are culturally specific and related to the tradition with which one is engaging not as a learner, but as an experienced participant. After the event, the researcher is able to draw on his or her experience of musical-being-in the-world, analysing the information gleaned, assessing the interactions that took place and drawing meaningful conclusions.

In this instance, my first-hand experience as a researcher is supported to some degree by the experiences of my collaborators as well as other musician-researchers who have found themselves in similar cross-cultural collaborative environments and to whom I make reference throughout the paper.

## IMPROVISATION

Although we used a range of other methods to acquaint ourselves with one another's musical histories (e.g., listening to recordings and live renditions of our traditional music) much of our initial material was generated by improvising together. Group improvisation is about both spontaneity and relinquishing control over at least some of the musical ideas, and there is an element of uncertainty inherent in the process. However, musicians will define improvisation within a broad range of parameters depending on their experience and the genre of music with which they are most familiar.

Improvisation is not the only musical phenomenon in which elements of uncertainty are at play. Indeed uncertainty plays a vital role in many aspects of musical interaction. Extemporisation and variation within fixed musical structures frequently occur in the Fulani music that I was to become so familiar with. Similarly, at a

Scottish traditional music ‘pub’ session, a series of chunks from a memorised communal repertoire are put together seemingly at random, selected spontaneously by one or several of the participants as the *set* develops. Despite a strong element of uncertainty, these processes would rarely be defined as improvisation by the musicians themselves. There are many similar examples.

The style of improvisation in our collaborations was not *free improvisation*, but a bringing to the table of a range of pre-learned musical concepts, each of us drawing on our specific communal memorised repertoires. An internalised structural memory was a key element in the creative process. Each player came with his or her individual style and influences, which were added to the mix. It was these four elements – improvisation, memorised traditional repertoire, internalised traditional structures and individual style– that provided the palette from which our creative explorations began.

## THE CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

My previous musical interactions with musicians from oral traditions had generally come about through encounters with fellow Europeans at traditional music festivals within Europe. We had a great deal in common, musically and culturally speaking. These encounters involved little improvisation. In contrast, working with UK-based musicians from West and North Africa required a different approach because we shared fewer musical concepts. That is why using improvisation as a starting point was so important. However, in all collaborative work there is a need to be aware of potential difficulties when both spoken and technical language are not shared. Our confrontation could only be positive if it was based on respect and the will to know and understand each other’s cultures. It was therefore vital to gain at least some background cultural knowledge of one’s collaborators before engaging in a musical dialogue.

One collaborative project that illustrates some of the challenges associated with cross-cultural musical dialogue is AfroCubism, a band (and album of the same name) created in 2010. This was a high-profile cross-cultural music project orchestrated by Nick Gold of World Circuit Records. AfroCubism was a collaboration between Cuban guitarist Eliades Ochoa of Buena Vista Social Club and a group of Malian musicians that included Toumani Diabate as well as guitarist Djelimady Tounkara (a Manding griot and former star of Bamako’s Super Rail band) and ngoni player Bassekou Kouyate. In an interview with Gold, Will Hodgkinson, a journalist for the Guardian, asked him and the musicians about the collaboration.<sup>1</sup> Gold states that there were language problems between the French-speaking Malians and Spanish-speaking Cubans. Cultural issues related to lifestyle also created tension between the two groups. In a seemingly weary tone, Gold asks the interviewer “how many times today have they told you music has no barrier and it’s a universal language?” (Hodgkinson 2010). This example suggests that the project was not characterised by cross-cultural dialogue and mutual understanding, rather by its opposite: an entrenchment of difference and an affirmation of the power imbalances that are so often involved in cross-cultural collaborations of a commercial kind.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgkinson, W; Buena Vista Take Two in The Guardian (1.10.10)  
<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/sep/30/afrocubism-buena-vista>

According to Kouyate, during the AfroCubism project, there was no time for the musicians to get to know one another musically through rehearsals. “We had to learn about Cuban music on the spot,” he states. In the same article Diabate comments, “I don’t play their music, and they don’t play my music. We do our own music and it becomes a fusion” (Hodgkinson 2010). However, on a promotional video for the AfroCubism project posted on YouTube, Diabate alters this statement, saying “The Malians, we have played the Cubans’ music. The Cubans also have played Malian music, and this has facilitated the creation of new music.”<sup>2</sup> Although the creative output may have become critically and commercially successful (in 2011, AfroCubism was nominated for a Grammy award for ‘Best Traditional World Music Album’), the comments made by some of the musicians indicate that the level of musical exchange in the project was somewhat superficial. Generally speaking, musicians must do the best they can in collaborations within the constraints of time and budget.

A different model of cross-cultural musical interaction is put forward by American guitarist and journalist Banning Eyre who collaborated with the Malian guitarist Tounkara during the 1990s. Eyre tells us that “the learning consisted mainly of a series of improvisations” (2000, p.235). However, in contrast to the brevity of the AfroCubism meetings, Eyre stayed with Tounkara for seven months, indicating the importance of taking time to establish a meaningful dialogue in collaborative working practices. Eyre’s experience of studying in Mali with Tounkara in an extended interaction implies a very different kind of musical relationship. This way of working is more consistent with the model my collaborators and I were aiming for.

In our collaborations, all interactions took place within the UK. We got to understand one another’s musics at a deeper level because the association lasted over a period of months and years rather than days. Like Tounkara and Eyre, we socialised, ate each other’s food and became friends. Topics of informal conversation when we were not playing music ranged from differences in access to education and life opportunities to basic human rights, politics, religion, immigration policy, quality of life, sexual equality, business issues and professionalism. Insights into one another’s opinions informed our musical interactions by framing the social function of the music within a broader range of cultural values.

This type of collaboration is uncommon. Participants were committed in a way that went beyond any formal contract, often driven by simple curiosity. However, I am convinced that the outcome demonstrates its validity as a piece of research. We invested our own time and speculated on the outcome because we believed that by doing so we could enrich our lives and contribute something of value to our wider cultural communities.

## ORAL TRADITIONS

Oral interchange has been a key element in this research. In societies where oral traditions are still very strong, the value of communal knowledge and oral history is vitally important. Broadly speaking, because of the weight that text-based representations carry in our western culture, diminished importance tends to be

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDe47kNWsYE>

placed on oral traditions. Ghanaian drummer Samuel Yeboah, one of my collaborators, explained that “The traditional music in Ghana [...] carries the history, but people don’t see it as music. They don’t value it that much.”<sup>3</sup> This problem is aggravated in West Africa because African ethnomusicologists are hugely under-represented. Ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu suggests that this may be due to the fact that for many practicing musicians and researchers in West Africa, their first language “has no currency as a medium of scholarly exchange in Europe or America” (2003, p.20). Similarly, in my experience, the importance of memorised communal repertoires in the UK often goes unacknowledged. This problem can be remedied by developing new non text-based methods for representing research carried out in the area of oral traditions. For this reason, it could be suggested that the practical outcomes of this project are in many ways more significant than the written description. These range from live performances and recording projects to education workshops.

## COLLABORATORS



Figure 2 Samuel NkrumahYeboah from Ghana

Samuel Nkrumah Yeboah, sometimes known as Powerful, is a Ghanaian percussionist in his thirties. He and I first met in 2006 through his drumming workshops for music students at Dartington College of Arts where I was a lecturer. He trained as a master drummer and drum-maker in Ghana and with those skills he has been able to make a living. He moved to the UK in 2003, though he continues to run projects in Ghana. In the UK, his musical activities include trading goods (mainly drums) from Ghana, organising drumming and dance workshops and doing live performances. In 2008, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters from the

<sup>3</sup> Yeboah, Samuel Nkrumah; *Interview with the author* (25.11.2010)



University of East Charleston in South Carolina for humanitarian work in his home country. Here he briefly describes his musical traditions:

There are many different traditions in Ghana that I've inherited from Accra, Cape Coast and Ashanti regions – Ga, Ewe, Ashanti, Accra style. Kpanlogo is a dance style played by the Ga people, and Gomé and Kolomashie are in the Accra style. Kpanlogo is ceremonial music, Kolomashie is for street carnival, carrying the frame drums. In Ewe you get war dances, lullabies, work songs related to farming and fishing as well as chants for sick people. You also get fetish music, which is like trance music.<sup>4</sup>

He goes on to describe his own initiation into the world of drumming;

In 1997 I joined a group, but before then I was already making and playing drums. Most people just sit around, and somebody takes their drum and starts playing and other people join in – just hanging out socially. Many people were in groups together, training at the Arts Centre. There were lots of different people training – say around twenty groups, each with twenty-five people practicing three times a week in the evenings. There is a teacher who tells each person what to play. The bell pattern holds everything together. You start with that. Some of the bell patterns you already know because you've heard them so many times. But there's a difference between hearing it and when you have to do it – then you start to get yourself to learning the part properly. All the things you've been hearing for so many years, they come to you. So, you start off with the bell pattern and when you get to know more they put you to a different drum – kagan, then kidi, the sogu and atimevu [master drum]. This is in Ewe drumming. Sometimes there are more changes in sogu than in kidi, so you stay on the kidi for a while. Then sometimes they change to Accra music, or to Guinea music and before you realise, you come forward and forward until you get to a time when you can play all the instruments and repertoire – like that.<sup>5</sup>

Jeff Pressing's description of the process of improvisation in traditional drum ensemble music of the Ewe people in Ghana provides further background on the musical traditions that Samuel brought to our collaboration:

The optimal memorisation skills required of performers are inevitably linked to the nature of the music, and particularly its position on the improvisation/ composition continuum [...] The master drummer functions as a master of ceremonies, and his selective recall of patterns from a vast repertoire of possibilities triggers corresponding pre-composed steps [...] Memory is not based on the idea of a through-composed piece, but on a palette of materials which may be drawn on to bring forth a range of musical effects – a system closely allied to the formulaic composition model of improvisation (1998).

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<sup>4</sup> Yeboah, Samuel Nkrumah; 25.11.2010)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid (25.11.2010)



Figure 2. Simo Lagnawi from Morocco on stage at Hootananny, Brixton, London with the author

A musician for whom I have recorded three albums to date and who has also contributed to my own work is Moroccan Gnawa musician Simo Lagnawi (b.1974). Simo and I met at a festival in 2012 and have since collaborated on recordings and live projects. Gnawa is the music of sub-Saharan slaves brought to North African regions in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco several centuries ago. Simo himself is from the Berber tribe. The Gnawi are an ethnic group, but Gnawa is also a distinct musical culture that is associated with trance ceremonies called Lilas that cleanse people of bad spirits. During the ceremonies the guembri (a camel-skinned bass instrument), drums and krakebs (metal castanets that represent the iron handcuffs of slavery) are played, led by a mâalem (master musician and spiritual leader). The music (along with specially chosen incense and sacrifices) evokes the spirits, who are a mixture of Muslim saints and animistic spirits of much older religions.

The music itself is based on a communal repertoire of ‘standards’ and themes that can be extemporised and improvised upon by its exponents, as the many variations in recorded versions of the repertoire testify. Since relocating to the UK in 2009 Simo has invested his time teaching his music to others and collaborating with traditional musicians from other countries, gradually opening up to musical ideas from outside his own tradition. We have released two albums to date, both of which received a great deal of press both national and international, and we have performed live on BBC Radio 3 for ‘World On 3’. Simo has travelled widely, performing in countries as disparate as Dubai, Morocco, Italy and Latvia.



Figure 3. Juldeh Camara from The Gambia and the author.

Another collaborator was Juldeh Camara (b.1966), an hereditary Fulani griot from The Gambia. He was trained by his blind father from the age of seven and was highly regarded in his community for his skills as a griot and musician. He plays the riti (a one-stringed fiddle), tama and other percussion as well as being an exceptional vocalist. Experimentation is part of the modern Griot's work, and that is certainly true of Juldeh. After establishing himself in The Gambia and Belgium with the band Ifang Bondi, Juldeh spent three years working in Norway with jazz guitarist Knut Reiersrud, with whom he produced three albums. He has since collaborated with a number of European musicians, most recently Robert Plant, with whom he has toured the world.

Improvisation comes easily to Juldeh as it is built into the traditional musical structures with which he is familiar. His song texts “reflect a performer who straddles both the traditional and modern world” (Cogdell Dje Dje 2008, p.84). The American ethnomusicologist Jacqueline Cogdell Dje Dje, studied the music of West African fiddlers and made several transcriptions of Juldeh's music during research for her book *Fiddling in West Africa*, published in 2008. Her text demonstrates the extent to which improvisation is used in Juldeh's music. She finishes the section on him by stating: “Not only does Camara have many new ideas, he presents them experimentally, proof perhaps not only of his unique disposition, but also that in the



post-colonial period fiddlers born to the profession have had to become more innovative to compete with newcomers and for audiences” (p.88).

I grew up in Clackmannanshire, Central Scotland, which has a rich local musical tradition, producing several well-known fiddlers such as Alasdair Fraser. My father started teaching me the violin when I was eight years old. The Falkirk Festival and Highland games in Alva were two major local cultural events that promoted traditional culture in the form of sports, music, poetry, song and dance, often in a competitive setting. Traditional dance and song was taught at school. As a teenager, meetings with other players at national music gatherings such as the National Youth String Orchestra of Scotland and the RSAMD junior department in Glasgow ignited my interest in the diverse fiddling styles from around the country and beyond. The traditional dance forms, which are based on their distinctive rhythms, include reels, jigs, polkas, strathspeys, slip jigs, barn dances, mazurkas and the like, generally played by several melody players in unison. It is music to be played for entertainment in participatory communal contexts such as dances, céilidhs, or the more informal pub session. Although it may not be considered improvisation by participants, a traditional Scottish music session includes the spontaneous construction of sets of reels or jigs, airs, waltzes and the tunes of other dance forms. The format of a session is prescribed to the extent that a certain musical elements will be included, but exactly which ones and where they fit are never determined by the players beforehand. In that sense, the session includes a great deal of uncertainty and spontaneity that could be described as improvisation. The form and direction each session takes is improvised according to the dynamics of the session, the individuals involved, their particular shared repertoire and the mood of the moment.

## FAMILIARISATION

At the outset of the collaborations, we did a number of things to familiarise ourselves with one another’s musics in an informal manner over an extended period of time. I acquired a riti (one-stringed fiddle) that Juldeh had made so that he could teach me some of his fiddle music, and Simo presented me with a rebab, the north African version. We listened to recordings and live performances of one another’s music. I helped Samuel master a recording of traditional music he had made while in Ghana. We played alongside musicians from one another’s traditions, sometimes in night-long mint tea-drinking sessions with Moroccan musicians playing cassette cases instead of the noisy krakebs until I understood the structure of gnawa music.. We danced one another’s dances. I attended some of Samuel’s Ghanaian percussion workshops. Samuel describes his exposure to my music in the following way:

I like to know about many other musics. I know about céilidhs and different musics by going to events. When we organised that event [a charity fundraiser for his project in Ghana that included Scottish and African dance] it was about bringing people together from different backgrounds. I liked coming to the session to hear people play folk music [a Scottish/Irish pub session]. I enjoy listening to indigenous music from anywhere. I like native tones.<sup>6</sup>

It is important here to mention traditional forms of learning. Despite our divergent musical and cultural backgrounds, one thing we had in common was the fact our

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<sup>6</sup> Yeboah, Samuel Nkrumah; (25.11.2010)

respective oral repertoires were acquired through a process of gradual assimilation. In each context, it would have been unusual to give or receive one-to-one lessons. Traditionally, members of our communities who showed a special aptitude or were hereditary musicians took up music. Eyre states in his book *In Griot Time*, “Jelis [hereditary musicians in west Africa] have no system of apprenticeship. The act of learning was another improvisation, and I was free to fashion my own approach” (2000, p.49). Samuel describes the oral learning process in a similar way:

The way we [West Africans] think about it is you listen to it and it becomes part of you if you can feel it. . . Africans are lucky to believe in a community where it’s more social. Our society is not so formal, in control with restrictions and things, so from a very early age it’s easy to explore just freely – just do it! ...But they have to be dedicated to it and really want to know it because everything is in the education of it, how much time you spend with it and how much it is around your life.<sup>7</sup>

Things changed in the teaching of traditional music in the latter part of the 20th century; more formal teaching now takes place in both Scotland and many parts of West Africa. In Ghana, however, this is mainly for the benefit of European and American enthusiasts. Samuel explains:

These days if you really love what you’re doing and you want to progress more there are some old people in Ghana with a lot of knowledge who want to pass it on. Now it’s more accepted and people come from abroad to learn. The old people know about workshops that they can teach. You can have one-to-one sessions – but it’s not normal for Ghanaians to learn that way.<sup>8</sup>

During the cross-cultural projects that we developed, our collaborative learning was in keeping with the traditional learning methods of listening, observing, and participating.

## THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Our musical interactions began to take shape as we embarked on a series of improvisations in one another’s homes, in hotel rooms, cafés, backstage before or after gigs, at music festivals, whilst travelling and even busking on the street. We noted certain common references as we went along and internalised parts without using notation. In my interactions with Juldeh, I noticed that our musical systems rely to some degree on implied harmonic structures. We both play melodic bowed stringed instruments, so we share certain technical and stylistic knowledge, such as how to execute certain types of ornamentation. We identified keys and scales that were familiar to both of us that we could use as a starting point. We all took initiative when it came to presenting ideas. Usually one person would simply begin playing. Samuel describes the process as follows:

How you do collaborations is just somebody plays something from their culture, and through that you hear something from some region. Say someone plays something from Scotland and it reminds you of something from some village, and that’s what will fit in. If anything doesn’t come in mind from anywhere that fits in, then you have to come to yourself and fill the gaps.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Yeboah, Samuel Nkrumah; (25.11.2010)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid (25.11.2010)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid (25.11.2010)

We were not simply playing our own music without regard to what others were contributing; we were forced to be spontaneous, flexible and creative in order to fill gaps where we had no common references.

We made audio recordings of many of our improvisations. We would then decide on a strategy to develop material further, or one person would work something out on their own that would be presented back to the others at a later date.

## COMMUNICATION

Despite the supposed ‘universal language of music,’ cross-cultural encounters can be fraught with difficulties, especially if verbal language is not shared. Throughout our collaborations verbal communication was not easy. English was the only common language between us, but it was not the first language of either Juldeh (Fula), Simo (Darija) or Samuel (Ewe). This sometimes led to musical misunderstandings, which we generally overcame through demonstration rather than verbal explanation.

Explaining the difference between key and pitch was always tricky. Simo would become frustrated when he couldn’t make himself understood regarding tuning and keys. When asked what key a piece was in he would insist always that his guembri is in “A,E,A”, those being the pitches to which the three strings are generally tuned. Given our divergent musical and educational backgrounds, our technical vocabularies for describing musical concepts also differed. In the Ghanaian, Gnawa and Fulbe traditions there is a drum language. In contrast, I have training in western music theory. We shared little music theory or tradition-specific terminology and had to pick up any relevant technical language as we went along. Terms and concepts derived from western music theory are sometimes used in cross-cultural collaborations with West African musicians, but to what extent depends on the education of the individual. Samuel has learned the relationship between western time signatures and some of his traditional Ghanaian rhythms as well as Scottish and Irish dance forms. His knowledge helped him to associate his rhythms with Scottish and Irish dance forms more quickly. He explains:

I have some knowledge of time signatures. I have come to learn about them after some time – which one is 6/8, which is 4/4. I learned this during my time of working with people who were teaching Europeans, and also my own teaching. In Ghana we play the thing [demonstrates 6/8 bell pattern], but even the master drummer doesn’t know it’s in 6/8 [...] I have a little mark of what is a jig, and also a slip jig [an Irish rhythm in 9/8] because of Como Denu [a collaborative composition we devised together].<sup>10</sup> If I am to mark it, I know that a jig is in the 6/8 area, so I try one thing and if it doesn’t fit I’ll try another. And the one you say is 4/4 [a reel] I’ll play kpanlogo maybe.<sup>11</sup>

Terminology used to describe more subtle musical concepts can differ greatly from culture to culture. Words I would use to describe pitch, dynamics and timbre such as *high* and *low*, *loud* and *soft* didn’t correspond with their terms. The words *strong* and *hot* were sometimes used by Juldeh in connection with dynamic or tone, especially

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<sup>10</sup> *Como Denu* (©Bingham L, Sanderson G and Yeboah, S N; 2009)

<sup>11</sup> Yeboah, Samuel Nkrumah; *Interview with the author* (25.11.2010)

where vocals were featured. Samuel “wouldn’t use a term like *high*<sup>12</sup> [for a high-pitched note]; more like *sharp* tones are high.” In my musical lexicon, the term *sharp* is generally associated with pitch, whereas in this context Samuel uses it to describe a sound that is a short, sharp slap on the drum skin. During one session with Samuel, he continually referred to a shaker as a bell. Eventually, I realised that he was playing the bell pattern on the shaker. These examples of different expressions of culture-specific musical concepts demonstrate how important it is to take time to understand one another’s terminology at the point that ideas are exchanged.

With regard to musical notation, we all wrote notes from time to time. I might have scribbled down a melody in western staff notation or attempted to analyse a rhythm by transcribing it. Simo would draw diagrams that represented timed sections of music. Juldeh occasionally wrote down lyrics so he could remember them, and Samuel made notes as to which rhythmic patterns should be played when. He values traditional methods of learning but also demonstrated a keen interest in being able to learn staff notation in order to better express his ideas. He explains:

There are some people who understand [western] music notation in Africa because they’ve been to school to learn it. If you know how to read music in a western way and you are doing collaborations it will help to some degree [...] Me myself I would like to study music properly [western music theory]. I like how I studied [through absorption]. I see it as proper, but it’s always good to be able to bend.<sup>13</sup>

Juldeh Camara described how once, when asked to participate in a cross-cultural music project in the UK, he was expected to communicate his musical ideas using western staff notation.<sup>14</sup> His lack of notation skills meant he could not continue to participate in the project, yet his wealth of musical knowledge is great. To reject his potential musical input on the grounds of ‘musical illiteracy’ appears short-sighted. This is an indicator of a mindset that values text-based representations of music over oral/aural ones. It also indicates a reluctance to find alternative means of communication that favour oral learning.

## RHYTHM AND FORM

Counting beats or bars is not generally done in Ghanaian or Fulani music. In initial interactions, I felt the need to know where beat ‘one’ was. However, the western musical concept of a strong beat at the start of a ‘bar’ meant nothing to either Samuel or Juldeh and I soon got used to feeling my way into the music without it. Even more confusingly, in chaabi (one of the most popular Moroccan musical styles with a fast 6/8 pattern) participants clap on the 3rd and 6th quaver beats. As a western European, I was confused for quite some time as to where the ‘down’ beat was. Other indicators such as melodic patterns repeated in the accompaniment guided my way, or sometimes a light beat (similar to the empty beat or *khali* in classical Indian music) provided a marker as to where we were in a phrase. I was not the only one who became rhythmically confused. I once was asked to play some of my traditional Scottish dance music in a gathering of Moroccan musicians, but when Simo improvised a percussion accompaniment it was clear he was hearing the ‘down’ beat in a completely different place. As a West African, Samuel’s experience of working

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> Camara, Juldeh; *In conversation with the author* (2010)



alongside European musicians provides some insight into the different ways in which we conceptualise rhythm:

One thing is that when you Europeans learn African music you learn it so much more with numbers, and that makes it confusing when things shift a bit. Counting is good in a way, but there's too much counting. Even when they teach dance here [in the UK] it's 'one two three four, five six se-ven eight [...]'. I have also found that when people learn drumming like that they don't spend a lot of time with the drum. Then when you play something off-beat it shifts a bit, and it's not how they know it.

Eventually, the concept of dividing music into bars and beats became irrelevant for me as I temporarily disregarded the western musical theories that I had been taught. The concept of independent lines proceeding in a linear fashion was of no use to me in this context and I had to let it go. My individual contribution no longer mattered. What was important was the combination of parts. In order to participate, I had to adapt my way of thinking so that I understood each structural element in relation to the others, and that projected my playing into a whole new realm. When Samuel performed as a lone percussionist, the lack of interlinking rhythmic parts making up a structural whole sometimes placed him in unfamiliar musical territory. Occasionally, as we played, I could hear him murmuring other percussion parts under his breath, as if to complete the picture. For this reason, I sometimes supported him by playing the bell, bones or pot in our pieces instead of melody lines.

Understanding one another's approach to musical form –the over-arching structure of the music– was the most challenging problem for us. The 'long form' of music is generally the last aspect one picks up when learning a new music. In this instance we had to understand the internal workings of the music on a larger scale in order to contribute ideas in a meaningful way. Within these frameworks, room is given for variation and improvisation in varying degrees. The only way to learn these long forms is to listen to them repeatedly and play along.

For Banning Eyre the difficulty of understanding long forms went both ways. In improvisation sessions, Tounkara liked it when Eyre inserted his own fragments of blues-inflected licks into his bajourou music, so Eyre tried to teach him a twelve-bar blues. Eyre discovered that while Tounkara could solo freely using pentatonic scales, to his surprise he could not cover the chord changes.

This form is long, and I knew from experience that Malian musicians tend to get lost in it [...] It is quite another thing to live and breathe that form so that so that every note you play fits into it and you can improvise freely without thinking about it. Even as accomplished a musician as Djelimady needed to spend some time wrestling with that form before he could play it (Eyre 2000, p.55).

I experienced similar difficulties when trying to keep track within the long ostinato phrases of Fulani music and the rambling introductions, then call and response sections of gnawa music. However, during our Julaba Kunda project the tune-based system of the Scottish dance music tradition was just as challenging to Juldeh. It requires players to learn many chunks of material from memory, and this is where he struggled. The tunes are intended to be performed in more or less the same way on each repetition, often in unison with other players. Although short phrases are sometimes memorised and played in unison in Fulani music, the concept of

constructing whole pieces with fixed melodic material was alien to him. I tried teaching him tunes, but he consistently wandered away from the melody to do his own improvisations. When I added a part to one of his own recordings in which I doubled a long section of his riti playing he was astounded. “How can you do this? You are making a lot of work for me,” he said, meaning he would have trouble replicating what he played in unison with me in performance.<sup>15</sup>

Simo, as an experienced ‘trance’ musician, is highly aware of the structure of his music over extended periods of performance. During a lila ceremony the music has to pass through certain stages to allow the participants to enter the various states of trance. This can take all night. Despite the fact that he rarely works in that context these days, Simo is still acutely aware of building highs and lows into his performances and is an expert at leading the audience into a state of frenzy by timing his musical performances with that specific aim in mind. Performing with him means being under his direction, and on several occasions I have been pushed beyond my usual boundaries of speed and stamina during improvised sections in order to fulfil Simo’s need for creating a certain dynamic in the structure of the whole performance while he urged me on with the words “swim, swim!”

Samuel and I discussed how we interact in performance with fellow musicians from our own traditions with regard to musical structure. Improvisation is easier when everyone understands the rules. We both agreed on the importance of each member knowing where they are inside the long form so that communication can take place about how the piece is to be shaped. When certain pieces are performed, new sections are added spontaneously by players. Keeping tabs on who is responsible for selecting material for a new direction is vital. Even though our musics may vary in some important respects, this structural element was something we could both identify with in one another’s music.

The extent to which different long forms define music from a specific culture influences one’s level of flexibility when improvising in a cross-cultural context. It is possible to alter the scales in traditional Scottish music within limits without having much effect on the music as a whole. The music would still be recognisable to a Scottish musician. Alter the form, however, and it becomes something else all together. Identifying key differences in our long forms helped us establish the identifying markers for our own musical structures with more clarity i.e., what makes our music distinct from others. It may sound obvious that musicians should comprehend their own musical forms, but if one has grown up taking knowledge of those concepts for granted, it can be very difficult to explain exactly how they work to others coming from outside that tradition. Certain structural variables may be shared to a greater or lesser degree, but when improvising it is only by comparing these variables that one can come to understand which parameters are flexible and which are not. Understanding these differences in structure gave us greater openness in our playing while exploring unfamiliar territory.

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<sup>15</sup> Camara, Juldeh; *In conversation with the author* (2010)

## SUMMARY OF THE CREATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

It must be stressed that the range of creative processes in cross-cultural collaborations will vary from study to study depending on the origins and experience of the individuals involved in each encounter. The degree of overlap between music theories and concepts, and even spoken language(s), also impact the nature of transcultural/intercultural musical exchange.

In our experience, familiarisation by means of demonstration, explanation, listening and participation prepared the ground for meaningful exchange. To successfully transmit musical ideas, we established modes of learning and communication by noting common terminology and by developing a variety of cues and signals. Each musician needed to be able to identify the key structural features of their own musical traditions and have at least a basic understanding of the long forms of his or her collaborators' music. Understanding one another's musical signifiers gave us different sets of rules, which in turn presented new musical possibilities when improvising.

Improvisation was used as a starting point for musical dialogue. However, we felt the need to constrain our improvisations within self-imposed limits in order to retain what we felt were key identifying features of our own music. One recording, to which all three of us contributed ideas is "Ébaéé."<sup>16</sup> This track is particularly significant because it contains recognisable elements from each of our traditions. Samuel explains it from his own perspective in this way:

"Ébaéé" sounds like a mixture – you can hear everything. Each part is clear. The background and the start is Ewe music in 6/8 – agbadza [an Ewe dance form], and then Juldeh's voice and the fiddle feature also. I know if I played it in Ghana some people listening would feel very good. They would be interested in the collaboration. That sound is more African, but you can still hear the other influences. It's a cross-over thing, but it highlights every bit. In Ghana, even though it's a cross-over listeners will be able to bounce to the whole thing because the bell is there for them.<sup>17</sup>

This brings into focus an important issue that emerged as a result of this cross-cultural dialogue: that some key features of our respective musical traditions be retained. We were keen to explore new sounds, but we wanted listeners to be able to recognise original features from each musical tradition. We imposed limits on our improvisations to keep our explorations within defined cultural frameworks even as we forged links between those frameworks. We were content with each piece so long as there was a bell pattern, a jig rhythm or certain key vocal phrases in Fula that provided context and linked the musical ideas back to their roots, whatever else was going on in the mix. For us, it was important to not stray too far from ideas that establish our respective cultural identities. Ultimately, the improvisations highlight the fact that we are all a product of our musical and cultural backgrounds.

## OUTCOMES

The creative outcomes of this project reflect an appreciation of, and true dialogue between, the different musical cultures involved in the collaboration. Throughout the collaborative process, there was a different kind of energy in the artistic creation, a

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<sup>16</sup> Camara J, Sanderson G & Yeboah S N; Ébaéé from the album *Traders* by Julaba Kunda (Waulk Music 2010)

<sup>17</sup> Yeboah, Samuel Nkrumah; 25.11.2010

certain magic in not knowing exactly what would emerge from the uniqueness of the situation. Feedback from audiences indicated that hearing new combinations of sounds in unexpected ways and witnessing musicians from different traditions interacting in the way that we did was stimulating and thought-provoking.

The album *Harpaphonics* (released in January 2009) contains three tracks developed from material that was initially generated during improvised sessions with Samuel. Profits from *Harpaphonics* CD sales have been shared with Samuel's charity, *Project Okurase* in Ghana.<sup>18</sup> In 2009 we performed together on several occasions at festivals with *The Harpaphonics Ensemble*, in educational contexts and live radio sessions where we discussed our collaborative work.<sup>19</sup>

In 2010, Juldeh Camara and I released a collaborative album containing fifteen original tracks that combine our traditions under the name *Julaba Kunda*, meaning *trader-folk* in Fula. He is now working with Robert Plant in his band The Sensational Space Shifters.

In 2013 'Gnawa London' by Simo Lagnawi and produced by myself was released on my Waulk Records label, followed in 2014 by 'The Gnawa Berber' on Riverboat Records. On the latter album I played the violin on one track. Simo and I have just finished recording a third album on which I also play riti, violin and piano. My new album of music for Swedish nyckelharpa is due out in 2015 on which Simo is guesting on one track playing the awisha, a small guembri from the gnawa tradition of North Africa.

Listen here: <http://hdl.handle.net/10871/18808>

## CONCLUSION

The benefits to the participants in this project have been clear. The joy of collaboration comes when musicians can, through experimentation and improvisation, celebrate differences and commonalities in their musics. On a personal level, the collaborations that were the subject of this study have enriched and informed our individual practice to a much greater degree than anticipated. We have been inspired to generate new music and develop ideas in a way that we would not previously have considered.

With regard to developing and defining a methodology for generating new cross-cultural compositions, I feel I have taken positive steps towards defining a model that works in certain situations. This model suggests a flexible time-frame beginning with an open-minded and informal custom-built familiarisation process during which all participants get to know one another's musical traditions. Obviously this necessitates serious commitment from participants, and given the constraints of time, opportunity, financial backing and geographical boundaries this may be asking a bit much in some instances. However, I would stress that within every community there are likely to be members of cultural traditions who would be keen to participate in a project such as this on a local level (Samuel and I began working together partly due to our geographical proximity).

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<sup>18</sup> [www.projectokurase.org](http://www.projectokurase.org)

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jo-shvH\\_w6o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jo-shvH_w6o)



A sense of cultural isolation in a foreign land can therefore encourage collaboration through improvisation as a means of affirming one's identity as a cultural being. Traditional musicians from a range of backgrounds reach out to others in an effort to share their cultural identity with those who can relate to their situation. Sharing is key to the whole idea, and I have been overwhelmed by the musical generosity of my fellow improvisers, particularly as I was the only woman in the mix and not of their religion (Muslim in the case of Simo and Juldeh). This model for cross-cultural collaboration acknowledges that differences in prior learning, socio-cultural concepts, lifestyle, religion, gender and working methods can all affect the processes and outcomes. It places traditional modes of learning such as absorption above more formal methods. It emphasises the value of oral transmission whilst acknowledging the positive role that text-based representations can play. This model also encourages improvisation at all stages of the process, especially as a means of creating an initial dialogue at the outset of the creative process.

It is anticipated that the resulting outputs (in the form of performance work, recordings and writings) can represent to others the value of more in-depth interaction between members of musical traditions. It is hoped that this type of collaboration could also encourage deeper investigations between musicians in order to generate a better understanding of the diversity of musical endeavour. Finally, it is hoped that this mode of working could act as a model in other areas of enterprise, providing the opportunity to explore and benefit from interactions between communities in the broadest sense.

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## Musical examples

- Camara J; Sanderson G; Yeboah S N; *Ébaéé* (© Waulk Music 2010)
- Bingham L, Sanderson G and Yeboah, S N; *Como Denu* (2009)

## Images

- Samuel Nkrumah Yeboah (G Sanderson 2010)
- Juldeh Camara & Griselda Sanderson (Tim Dollimore 2011)
- Simo Lagnawi & Griselda Sanderson with Gnawa Blues All-Stars (Gosha ShantiOm 2014)

## Further musical examples

- Dounia by Simo Lagnawi with Griselda Sanderson from the album 'The Gnawa Berber' (Riverboat, 2014)  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/artists/74bc6e39-68b4-47af-8c9a-b2c0173d21fa>
- Scotland by Julaba Kunda, with Juldeh Camara on riti and vocals and Griselda Sanderson on violin live at Musicport Festival UK 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sp8ZK8GVcqA>
- Ébaéé by Julaba Kunda with Samuela Yeboah on percussion and vocals, Juldeh Camara on riti, kologo and vocals and Griselda Sanderson on nyckelharpa from the album 'Traders' (Waulk Records 2011) <https://youtu.be/XQ5YVIhxAtw>
- Improvising with the Gnawa Blue All-Stars, directed by Simo Lagnawi and with Hassan Nainia on Lotar  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31DMTCLOm\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31DMTCLOm_A)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Educated at Alva Academy, the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and Dartington College of Arts, Dr. **Griselda Sanderson** completed her PhD in 2003 on internet use as a means of representing Scottish and Irish musical identity. She was a Lecturer in Contemporary Music Performance at University College Falmouth, Dartington Campus from 2000 to July 2010, where she was also responsible for some post-graduate supervision. In 2009 she co-wrote a BA award in Popular Music for University College, Falmouth.

Griselda is also a traditional music practitioner and has played the violin and nyckelharpa in numerous performances, recordings, and film projects including the Royal Shakespeare Company (*The Winters Tale*, 2013). In 1998 she co-composed and performed music in the traditional Swedish style for the film based on Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, directed by Mike Figgis. She has written and produced seven albums of original music, two in collaboration with West and North African musicians including 'Yakar' by Senegalese singer Amadou Diagne. She has her own publishing company and record label. Her album *Harpaphonics* of original compositions for the nyckelharpa was released in January 2009 and was listed at number five in the top ten best world music releases of 2009 by the Sunday Times newspaper. She is currently working on a follow-up due for release in 2015 and is also working with London-based Moroccan Gnawa maâlem Simo Lagnawi on his third album. This summer she will be performing live music on stage at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London, in a new production of 'As You Like It'.