

On est ensemble:

A participatory study of the *jembe* tradition as preserved by the *griots* of West Africa

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine how a culture's values are reflected in a specific pedagogical process through participant observation; in essence, I endeavor to examine first-hand the anthropology of pedagogy. The *jembe*, in truth, is comparable to a window into both the teaching model of a Senegalese master drummer and the cultural values reflected in his pedagogical method. In learning to play the parts of seven *jembe* rhythms with fluidity and recording their cultural significances, I discover the elements of criticism and sacrifice deeply inlaid in the tradition of this instrument. Relative to the communal setting of the *griot* family in which my fieldwork takes place, I learn the philosophy of preservation held by the African musician, manifested in how his instrument is taught, played, and fabricated. Through analysis of the themes of criticism and sacrifice which surface during my research, I discover the cultural priorities of togetherness and preservation reflected in the pedagogical system of the *jembe* tradition's native West African context.

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INTRODUCTION

To this point, the vast majority of research on West African drumming, particularly the study of the *jembe*, has focused on rhythmic analysis. As logical as this focus may seem to a Westerner intending to “preserve” West African music, it carries critical, potentially self-defeating assumptions, vis à vis the tradition it examines. One assumption is that rhythms need to be on paper to be preserved, or essentially, canonized. To accomplish this, a nomenclature through which rhythms can be transcribed is necessary, wherein rests another critical assumption: that all rhythms *can* be set on paper. One need not look far in the literature of West African ethnomusicology to find the ground-breaking work of John Miller Chernoff through his fieldwork in Ghana during the 1960's (Chernoff 1979). Recognizing the outstanding caliber of this and many other pieces of research, not excluding those on a much smaller scale completed by students at the School of International Training here in Senegal, the approach to “preservation” of these transcription studies contrasts sharply from the oral forms of preservation native to the *jembe* African context. As Malenke master drummer (*folo*) Mamady Keita recognizes

in his book *A Life for the Djembe*, no African would ever write down *jembe* rhythms, only commit them to memory (Keita 2004). Though he recognizes the potential ethical advantage of transcribing West African music, in an effort to preserve and expand its tradition outside of Africa, this notion of written preservation alludes to anthropologist Nick Nesbitt's pertinent statement that West African drumming, "Is a highly elaborated art form *bound* to the musical language of Europe (Nesbitt 2001)."

The first time I had the opportunity to play the *jembe* was in my fifth grade general music class with Mrs. Wills. Her husband was a hand-percussionist, and as such, she diligently emphasized World Music in her curriculum. So began a life-long love affair, only without formal lessons or access to the native African context of the *jembe*. I was titillated last summer when I visited Ghana for a month on a social justice endeavor, and became determined to learn as much as I could about all aspects of the drum when I came to study in Senegal. My motivation in choosing the *jembe* as the focus of my Independent Study Project parallels that of renowned ethnomusicologist Eric Charry of Wesleyan University: "So how can one go about studying the *jembe* ? [Going] to Africa to learn about the traditions first-hand [is] certainly the preferred method (Charry 2000)."

The tradition of the *jembe* has been orally passed down for centuries throughout West Africa, beginning in Guinea and Mali with the Maninka *numu* blacksmiths and migrating to the present-day countries of Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso (Charry 2000). After arriving in Senegal and spending two weeks at Dakar's *Village des Arts* participating in workshops instructed by a master drummer prior to the Independent Study Project period, I was intrigued by the glaring difference between how West African drumming is taught in its native African context and how it is presented in Western anthropological literature I had previously read. If this tradition and these

rhythms continue to be so well-preserved orally after thousands of years, why do Western anthropologists feel so compelled to “preserve” so much on paper? As Chernoff himself recognizes, “As a science, ethnomusicology is still at a ‘data-gathering’ stage, and its most immediate applicability seems to be to augment music theory (Chernoff 1979, 28).”

The most logical reasoning I can formulate for this Western fixation for written preservation is that, in general, we humans have a peculiar way of confining our learning processes to those we have become habituated to in the course of our lives. In the West, these methods are primarily written; in Africa, these methods are almost universally oral, particularly with regard to music. My motivation for this project is to begin to understand the *jembe*—how it is taught to be played, culturally understood, and constructed—through studying it within its native context. I am a Westerner and my research inevitably reflects this status, but I feel there is inadequate knowledge to this point of the pedagogical system used to pass down the tradition of what has become West Africa’s most celebrated instrument.

In this study I explore both the teaching model of a Senegalese master drummer and the cultural values reflected in his pedagogical method. In acquiring the deceptively simple technique by which the *jembe* is played simultaneous to learning and recording the parts and cultural significances of seven of its rhythms, I discover the elements of criticism and sacrifice deeply inlaid in its tradition. Relative to the communal setting of the *griot* family in which my fieldwork takes place, I learn the philosophy of preservation held by African musicians, manifested both in how instruments are played and how they are fabricated. Through analysis of the themes of criticism and sacrifice I repeatedly encounter during my research, I discover the cultural priorities of togetherness and preservation reflected in the pedagogical system I examine as a participant-observer.

It should be noted that I do not transcribe any music in written form for this study. I believe studying the *jembe* as a Westerner without transposing or translating its rhythms respects the centuries-old tradition from which it arises and attempts to preserve it in its own terms. One month of studying this pedagogical system has proven to be only an introduction at best, but a worthwhile study for myself and the Senegalese whose tradition I hope has become better-understood.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I examine how a culture's values are reflected in a specific pedagogical process; in essence, I endeavor to examine the anthropology of pedagogy. The *jembe*, in truth, is comparable to a window into this system that expresses the cultural values corresponding to its context. As many students before me have discovered, it is of utmost necessity both to participate in and observe this process of learning in order to study any aspect of West African music; Lucien DeLaBruyere, who studied the *jembe* here in Dakar in the Spring of 2007, states that no matter which research lens is used when studying music in this part of the world, "It is of no importance to the native African, for experience trumps all other forms of learning. Experience and observation are the most essential elements in developing a sense of African rhythm (DeLaBruyere 2007)."

In my field work for this study, I learn the tradition of the *jembe* as it is devolved from a Senegalese *griot* to his apprentice through participant observation. Through nearly seventy hours of formal instruction under a professional musician and *griot*, Fa Kalé Cissokho, I learn over fifty different parts to seven primary rhythms of the *jembe* with fluidity and pictorially record the process by which the drum is fabricated. Most

importantly, I rely on my field work participating in the pedagogical system of the *jembe* to analyze the cultural values reflected in my instructor's teaching method and philosophy.

Near my instructor's home in HLM Grandyoff on the outskirts of Dakar, Senegal, I spend the better-part of each day for three weeks studying, observing, working, and even eating in the communal setting of the *griot* family, participating as authentically as possible in the tradition of the *jembe* within the restrictions of my limited timeframe. It goes without saying that, outside of Senegal and the native West African context of the *jembe*, any study which attempts to preserve cultural authenticity would be impossible to complete. As Charry concurrently states, "African methods of learning work in Africa: watching, doing, being criticized, revising, and apprenticing (Charry 2000)."

My efforts to establish rapport with my instructor began well-before the start of the Independent Study Project period in the months of February and March during the dance and *jembe* workshops organized by the School for International Training at the *Village des Arts* in Dakar. With the goal of being taken on as a serious student and receiving written permission from a *griot* to conduct research among he and his family, I was inordinately fortunate to find such an exceptional and willing instructor as Fa during this workshop period. To earn his trust, I conducted numerous preliminary meetings during which I gave gifts of fruit to he and his family as a sign of my benevolent intent and curious purpose. This rapport-building strategy familiarized Fa's family with my presence prior to the start of my fieldwork, and proved infinitely beneficial both to my learning and personal growth.

When done with care, inserting oneself as a Westerner into a traditional African system of pedagogy can be a highly effective methodology by which to establish

credibility and attain authentic fieldwork. In my study, being eager and taking initiative to learn without a doubt contributed most to the success of the participant-observation methodology. Transitioning to studying the drum individually from studying it as a member of a group of Westerners at the *Village des Arts* certainly helped to shed the potentially shielding cloak of tourism and brought me as close as I believe was possible to learning the tradition of the *jembe* authentically.

What was gained in closeness to tradition, however, was unfortunately lost in lack of distance from my sometimes overwhelming amount of fieldwork data. It is important to note that studying anthropology during this study nothing short of required my effort to become a musician, as the more and better I learned to play the *jembe*, the deeper I was permitted by my instructor to delve into its tradition. Achieving this musical fluidity, however, required countless hours of practice and concentration, listening dozens of times to each of the more than forty audio recordings my instructor and I made of the seven rhythms we studied. This nearly constant exposure to data made creating distance from fieldwork a relative impossibility. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that no amount of diligent practice or painstaking data collection alters the fact that I was a white man attempting to study an instrument steeped in thousands of years of Black African tradition. The obstacles created by this inherent disadvantage were difficult to negotiate, particularly within a communal setting where not all comers and goers can be made aware of a researcher's purpose within only a three week timeframe.

I was incredibly fortunate that my instructor was so eager and willing to take me on as a student and expose me to all he did. I feel my methodology of participant observation was successful, and well-complemented by the use of digital audio recording both to aid in my musical success in learning the rhythms of the *jembe* and to record the

cultural significance of each rhythm. With rare exception, I was embraced by the community in which I studied, to the extent that I was permitted to play with members of the family other than my instructor for dance rehearsals at night for the women of the family. I was also able to play for and observe a Senegalese Muslim Baptism, though my musical success during this social event was limited. This would be expected, however, as I had studied rhythms for less than one month that I was attempting to play alongside professional musicians.

FINDINGS

Les Cours

Lessons with Fa followed a strict model of recitation and repetition and were designed to teach the maximum number of rhythms that Fa determined would be manageable within my three week timeframe for fieldwork.

During the first week, Fa started each lesson simply by playing one or two notes. Each time, he would say “*Donne-moi* [give me],” instructing me to play exactly what he played, exactly how he played it. As successive notes built on preceding ones to form a series, Fa would inform me that we had just studied an *appelle*, or call to a rhythm. After repeating this call non-stop often for upwards of ten minutes, lessons proceeded to the first and second accompaniments of rhythms, also instructed using the same teaching model of recitation and prolonged repetition. With the call and first two accompaniments learned, Fa proceeded to teach me the cultural significance of each rhythm, which I recorded digitally in audio form and took handwritten notes on. Before proceeding to another rhythm, we digitally recorded each of the parts we had studied to serve as an aid for my individual practice after lessons.

The second week of lessons focused solely on the teaching of solos and additional accompaniments or calls to each rhythm. Lessons started with review of material studied on the previous day, with Fa paying close attention to evidence of whether or not I had studied our recordings and practiced the rhythms individually. Again using the same recitative teaching model, I was taught several solos to each rhythm, each of which were recorded in audio form at the end of our sessions before proceeding to the solos of a different rhythm. At the end of our second week, Fa began to emphasize the importance of learning “*l’esprit* [the spirit or feeling]” of each rhythm, accomplished by listening repeatedly to our audio recordings and practicing individually as much as possible.

The third and final week of classes consisted entirely of review, studying no new parts and re-recording all parts for clarification purposes and continued practice.

Tonique, Clacqué, Bass

During the first day of lessons, I learned that there are only three tones used to play all rhythms of the *jembe*: *tonique*, *clacqué*, and *bass*. The *tonique* tone is created by striking the drum five centimeters from its rim close-handed with fingers clenched, while the *clacqué* tone is created by striking the drum ten centimeters from its rim open-handed with fingers spread apart. The *bass* tone is created far from the drum rim by striking the middle of the drumhead open-handed with fingers clenched

While playing an instrument with only three tones may seem simple, I quickly learned that the subtle difference in technique required to form the *tonique* and the *clacqué* tones is extremely challenging. A great amount of time and effort must be sacrificed to learn this technique and master the tones of the *jembe*. Patience and a willingness to endure a great amount of physical pain are required as well, as deep

blisters form quickly and cannot be given ample time to heal if the learning process is to proceed.

After two days of lessons, I eluded to the question of why this apparently vital technique issue had not been addressed during the workshops our group was given at the *Village des Arts* earlier in the semester. Fa told me that it would impossible to teach something like that to a group, claiming it would take months for each individual to master.

Learning the rhythms, he assured me, was the key. He explained that learning their names and playing them basically without regard to technique or cultural significance (as was the intent of the earlier group workshops) is the first step in the learning process of the *jembe*. The three tones are expected to come with time, and in the beginning stages of learning the *jembe*, equal emphasis should be placed on both what is played and how it is played. Learning the rhythms and how they are significant occurs simultaneously with learning the technique of playing the drum. Though this technique is introduced, it is expected simply to come over time in the course of learning the rhythms, rather than all at once.

“*Non! C’est pas ça!* [No! That isn’t it!]”

There were certain phrases which Fa used during every lesson. Whenever I botched a rhythm or played without vigor, he would shout in angst:

Non! C’est pas ça! C’est ça! [No! That isn’t it! It’s this (instead)!]

Pourquoi est-ce que tu as fait ça comme ça!? [Why would you do that like that (when it’s supposed to be done like this)!?]

Ne laisse-pas le jembe comme ça! [Don’t you leave the *jembe* like that!]

Il ne faut pas changer le rythme! [It’s unnecessary to change the rhythm!]

Il ne faut pas changer les mains! [It’s unnecessary to change your hands!]

After two weeks, the point at which Fa expected me to be capable of playing all seven rhythms and their accompaniments with fluidity, even the slightest error during lessons came to warrant strict, often harsh criticism. My playing was either highly praised or overtly disapproved of; praise usually coming in the form of a hand motion like the turning of a key and gestures of disapproval ranging anywhere from yelling to beating the sticks of the *dundun*, the drums often played to accompany the parts I was learning in the latter stages of our lessons. When I played exceptionally well, I was rewarded with extra food during lunch. Exceptionally poor playing, however, normally constituted being harangued, having my drum taken away, and/or being forced to play the *dundun* rather than my drum for periods of time ranging from ten minutes to upwards of an hour.

As my fluidity with rhythms increased, Fa asked members of his family to accompany our lessons with other *jembe*, *bellophone*, or *dundun* parts. I initially assumed these accompanists would be treated as guests of our lessons. I quickly came to learn, however, that they were equally as free and willing as my instructor to critique my lesson performance. Our lessons were also frequented by Fa's friends from in and around the neighborhood who would pass by throughout the morning. Whether they were fellow musicians or not, they too were willing and able to critique my playing during lessons, often in the form of either nods of approval or scoffs of remonstrance.

I was not alone, however, in being criticized during the teaching process as I learned during dance rehearsals which Fa asked me to help him accompany after our lessons during the third week of study. In an excerpt from my field journal, I recall my observations from one evening:

During dance rehearsal tonight, would-be soloists were called to present one by one, in front of everyone. The success of their performance was judged entirely by their fellow dancers, observers, but above all by the drummers. I was no longer playing with the ensemble for this dance, as

my hands were too fatigued, but Fa and the rest of the ensemble's reaction to the dancers was directly telling of a dancer's performance. If a dance was done poorly, the rhythm being played either lost complexity as parts dropped out or simplified, or fell apart completely, to the point which the drummers would stop playing. Fellow dancers would hoot and holler at a successful maneuver, while laughing at less successful ones.

During group dance lessons which did not consist of solo performances, Fa's sister who was instructing the class yelled repeatedly at children who danced poorly, even going so far as to hit them with the stick she was wielding.

“Il faut les vivre. [They must be lived.]”

Throughout our lessons, parts of rhythms not played on the *jembe* often carried as important if not more important a role than the parts I was learning on my drum.

Continually, I was instructed to play and learn the *dundun* parts in addition to *jembe* rhythms we studied. On more than one occasion during our lessons, I entered with the correct note at an appropriate spot relative to the other *jembe* parts being played.

Nonetheless, however, I was harshly scolded because my entrance had not aligned properly with the *dundun* part Fa had been audiating in his head. Although I had never heard this *dundun* part, I was held responsible for aligning with it, as Fa conveyed in his negative reaction.

To say I was taught to live rather than play these rhythms would perhaps be an understatement. Each day, Fa advised me to listen to our recordings just before I slept, and to audiate them constantly throughout the day. During the second week of fieldwork, Fa could observe that I was tired during our lessons. As if my fatigued state was entirely expected, he would correctly assume that having the rhythms in my head had kept me awake the night before. It was only after days of this apparent fatigue that I was allowed to take an afternoon off to recover on my own.

Though it is possible for strokes or notes to be added to any rhythm, Fa continually emphasized during our lessons that there is a “reality” to each rhythm which one must know flawlessly before attempting to improvise or expand on it. Fa also believes, “*Il y en a les rythmes qui sont nés avec l’histoire—les rythmes authentiques—il faut connaître la réalité.* [There are some rhythms which were born with the tradition—authentic rhythms—one must know this truth.] (Cissokho 2008)” To insert ones own spaces or interpretation into these authentic rhythms is to inject what Fa termed as, “*le virus.* [the virus.]” This liberty should never be taken by *jembe* musicians, as it degrades the tradition from which their instrument arises and denigrates the rhythms being played.

More Than Notes

All authentic *jembe* rhythms possess a cultural significance in addition to their musical reality. Significances vary in length, and can be attached to ethnic groups, specific social events such as marriages or baptisms, harvests, or even legendary figures. One such lengthier significance is the story of Soundiata Keita attached to the rhythm *Numudon*. As recalled from my field journal:

Soundiata was a handicapped man who wished to walk. He repeatedly tried to stand himself upright using branches from a tree, but all of his attempts failed as the branches broke easily under his weight. When Soundiata’s grandmother wished to have fruit from a nearby tree, she asked her good friend for assistance. Her friend refused, and this angered Soundiata. Soon after, Soundiata’s grandmother took to the forest in search of the *forgerons*. She told them of her son and his handicap. They presented her with *la grande fer* [the big iron] and claimed, “*Aujourd’hui, c’est le grand moment des Mandingues.* [Today is a grand occasion for the Mandinka.]” Three men were needed to carry the iron back to Soundiata, who used it to lift himself successfully. Soundiata went to the tree from which his mother had sought fruit and took it from the ground, roots and all, and gave it to his mother.

As a result, the rhythm of the *Numudon* signifies the dance of the *forgerons*, the French word for the ironsmiths of the Northern Mandinka who fabricate tools and

necklaces among their people. They descend from the *Numu* ethnicity, whose word for “dance” is “*don*.”

Significances to all rhythms, in the same fashion as the rhythms themselves, are preserved orally. This does not mean, however, that these significances are changeable or otherwise open to interpretation. When I told Fa of my homestay father’s version of the story of Soundiata Keita—including various discrepancies such as that it was Soundiata’s mother rather than grandmother who entered the forest and found the *forgerons*, and that it was another wife of her husband, rather than her good friend who refused to pick her fruit from the tree—Fa became angered and again insisted that there was a “reality” which apparently my father did not know.

“*Le jembe, c’est un truc mystique. [The jembe is a mysterious thing.]*”

The perceived mysteriousness of the *jembe* is perhaps best explained by the philosophy of its fabrication which Fa described to me:

On a tué un arbre pour fabriquer le jembe. On a tué une chevre aussi. Il est fabriqué avec les choses mortes, mais il est né encore pour servir les autres—il revit. Il est mort vivant, et ça c’est pourquoi c’est mystique.
[We killed a tree to make the *jembe*. We killed a goat, too. It is made from dead things, but it lives again to serve others—it relives. It is dead **and** living, which is why it is mysterious.] (Cissokho 2008)

It is also believed that exceptional playing is not the doing of the musician, but of a spirit who lives inside the drum. As such, the philosophy of great performance adds to the inscrutability of the instrument:

Si tu joues très bien, c’est pas toi qui joues, c’est un invisible qui vit dans le jembe qui joue—c’est le mystique qui joue. [When you play exceptionally well, it is not you who plays, it is something invisible that lives inside the *jembe* that plays—it is the spirit who plays.] (Cissokho 2008)

In the musician coming to know the rhythms which existed before him and allowing them to become a part of his being, it is he who gains. Ultimately, however, it is the responsibility of those who come to know these rhythms to teach them to others. Before even officially taking me on as a student, Fa assured me that I would become a “*petit maître* [young teacher]” by the end of our time together. Within the tradition of the *jembe*, the process of becoming a teacher begins almost as soon as the process of becoming a student, as reflected in how my teacher both referred to me and introduced me to others. It was never specified to who, but there was a constant emphasis placed on passing on what I had been taught—the “reality”—to others who would come to seek it.

It is important for a musician to recognize and respect that he must never attempt to become part of the rhythms of the *jembe*, only to allow the rhythms to become part of himself. In so doing, the tradition is upheld authentically from musician to musician. Those who play the *jembe* will always come and go in the same manner as presidents, and some will be better than others. But the *jembe*, like the role of the president, will always be there. As Fa explained to me, the *jembe* was there before us and it will be there after us. As a result, we who know the “reality” are obligated to pass on the tradition of how the drum should be played and treated (Cissokho 2008). Even if the *jembe* is “played,” Fa assured me, it is not “known” until these specific aspects of its tradition are known.

“Il faut enseigner les enfants...[The children must be taught...]”

It is not surprising, as Fa is a *griot*, that much of what he explained to me about the tradition of the *jembe* imbricates the explanation he gave me of the tradition of the *griot*. Similar to the *jembe*, it is the role of the *griot* to serve rather than guard against those who wish to hear the music of his tradition. Unlike the *jembe* whose tradition

should be learned as one matures, preservation of the *griot* tradition, in contrast, is seen as life-long process which begins during infancy. Fa explained that it is vital to the tradition for as many children as possible to be exposed to and surrounded by the music of the *griot* from the time they are very young. Children are believed to be the eventual guardians of the culture and tradition, and it is perceived to be equally as important that they live the tradition from their infancy as it is that they come to learn it in the course of their lives; indeed, these two processes are one in the same:

*Il faut enseigner les enfants. C'est comme ça que tu tiens le tradition.
Si on est parti, c'est les enfants qui vont le faire—sinon, qui vont le faire?*
[The children must be taught. This is how the tradition is upheld. If we are gone, it's the children who are going to keep the tradition—if not who will?] (Cissokho 2008)

In reference to his late father, a *griot* and celebrated *kora* player, Fa explained to me that his father “gave” him and his family the instrument before he died. It is they who now live the instrument and serve with it. In much the same way as the tradition of the *jembe*, is believed to both pre and postdate those who play it. As such, the tradition of the *griot* remains alive in those to whom the dead have passed it on.

The Fabrication Process

Within the native West African context of the *jembe*, the thought of a professional musician purchasing pre-made drum would be nothing short of absurd. As such, the process by which a professional musician fabricates his own instrument—by far the most common practice of African *jembe* musicians—is here outlined as I experienced it making a drum of my own under the careful guidance of my teacher:

Selection of the *bois*

The wood, or *bois*, forms the body of the *jembe*. Normally, professional musicians do not themselves fabricate the bodies of their instruments; this skilled labor is reserved

for a professional woodcarver, or *Laobé*, as their family name is known in Senegal. There are important characteristics of a *jembe* body, however, that a musician must thoroughly examine prior to purchasing the *bois* for his future instrument.

The first factor to consider is the type of wood from which the body has been carved. The drum I constructed is carved from *dimbe*, a hardwood from Senegal, though *lengé*, a lightly-colored hardwood from Mali (Cissokho 2008), and *nim*, a typically light-weight hardwood found throughout West Africa (Sotelino 2003), are among other types of wood commonly used to fabricate professional drums in Senegal as well. In addition to examining the natural quality of the wood used for the drum body, a musician must also inspect the quality of the labor performed on the body. Very minor imperfections or cracks in the wood can be filled at a woodshop, or *menuiserie*, and are nearly inevitable to a small extent. Drum bodies with large cracks on the outside or abnormal slices on the inside, however, should not be made into professional instruments. Glaring imperfections such as these will negatively effect sound quality to a gross extent and are acceptable only for low-quality, or “tourist” instruments. To ensure a quality, professional *jembe* sound, it is most crucial to select a drum body with a flawless, integral middle, found above the drum’s base as the body flares to form its upper bowl. This portion of the drum is a primary determining factor in sound purity, and as such must be entirely free of glaring cracks or imperfections.

Once a drum body has been selected, it is normally taken in its raw form (Fig. 1) to a *menuiserie* where craftsmen correct minor aesthetic imperfections and apply varnish

or design¹. In the case of my drum, cracks were filled and sanded before a dark varnish was applied the following day (Fig. 2).

Preparation of the *fers*

The rings, or *fers*, of the *jembe* are the primary components of the system by which the drumhead is attached and tensioned. There are three, all of which are fabricated at a metal shop by skilled iron craftsmen for modern fabrication. Originally, the rings of the *jembe* were constructed from cow skin, similar to the drumhead. This material is easily manipulated when wet, but strong and rigid when dry. In spite of this construction, however, drums fabricated using ancient construction methods often needed to be re-tightened during lengthy performances, originally usually accomplished by twisting branches through the drum's cords.

The smallest of the rings is attached to the base of the drum body prior to varnish or design being applied and should fit loosely so as to accommodate the drum's cords, affixed in later steps. It is important that the drum body be taken to a metal shop **before** a wood shop, as the welding process used to create the *fers* often burns slight marks in the wood, which must then be sanded clean at a *menuiserie* (as seen in Fig. 1).

The top of the drum requires two rings to properly tension the drumhead, one of which should be almost exactly the same circumference as the exterior of the top of the *jembe*, with only a small amount of extra space added to eventually accommodate the drumhead. The other ring, to be eventually affixed atop its smaller counterpart, should be slightly larger than the ring below (Fig. 3) so as to accommodate space for both the drumhead and the cords which will eventually be used to hold the aperture in place.

¹ Included in Figures 1 and 2 is the attached bottom iron ring of the drum. It should be noted that drum bodies are not sold with this ring included; the process of ring attachment is outlined in the following step.

It is important to wrap each of the three *fers* in cotton cloth prior to continuing drum assembly. This prevents the *fers* from rusting, which could damage all of the drumhead, cords, and drum body over time. Whatever material is available can be used for cloth. In all cases, the material is torn by hand into 1-1 ½” strips, folded in half, and wrapped around the rings (Fig. 4). At the end, the cloth is simply tied and ring preparation is complete.

Les noeuds

Somewhat surprisingly, only one knot, or *noeud* is used in most of the *jembe* fabrication process. The knot is relatively simple to construct (Fig. 5), and is repeated around the entirety of two of the three *fers*: the larger of the two upper *fers* as well as the *fer* at the base of the drum (Fig. 6). Most crucial in knot construction is ensuring that the number of spaces between knots is precisely the same for the top and bottom corded *fers*. If the number of spaces is not the same, the later process of cording will be nearly impossible to complete, likely compromising the entire drum fabrication process. In the case of my drum, the number was twenty five, though this can vary greatly from instrument to instrument depending on size and desired cording structure. Finally, once the knotting process of each *fer* is complete, ends of the cord are cut and burned to protect against fraying (Fig. 7).

It should be noted that there are two types of cord used in *jembe* fabrication: white and black. The white, used for knotting, is slightly weaker and thinner than the black, which is used to complete the following step.

Les cordes

The cording process marks the connection between the top and bottom of the drum. Starting with the bottom *fer* and using a simple technique, the cord is weaved up and down repeatedly through the *noeuds* of the top and bottom *fers* of the drum (Fig. 8). At this stage of *jembe* fabrication, the process of cording should be stopped at two-thirds so that the top *fer* can be slid off to mount the drumhead in later steps.

Le peau

The drumhead, or *peau*, of the drum should be purchased from a craftsman who specializes in preparing and selling animal skins. Normally, the skin of either a goat, deer, or cow is used to fabricate a *jembe*. Though other factors such as drumhead tension and wood quality certainly play a role, drumhead selection is a key factor in determining the sound of a drum. A cow skin drumhead, for example, usually produces a *jembe* higher pitch than a goat skin drumhead, making it an ideal choice for a drum to played among many other instruments in a large ensemble. In contrast, goat skin drumheads, the other most common choice for professional drums, are much easier on the hands to play for lengthy periods of time, such as during festivals or ceremonies (Cissokho 2008). In any case, skins should be thoroughly examined for holes, tears, or other imperfections, including differences in thickness across the skin due to poor removal from the animal, before being purchased. Prior to assembling the *jembe*, the skin should be soaked for a minimum of six hours in water so that it will be pliable and easy to manipulate over the drum.

Montage

To begin *jembe* assembly, or *montage*, the top *fer* of the drum is slid off and set aside.

Prior to mounting the drumhead, it is necessary to treat the inside of the body of the *jembe*. This is accomplished equally well with palm oil (*huile de palm*) or shea butter (*beurre de karité*), which serve doubly to protect the wood and help give the drum a warm, crisp overall tone. The product is applied by hand to the inside of the bowl of the drum, coating the entire surface up to approximately three inches from the top (Fig. 9).

After the skin is removed from its soaking container, it must be squeezed to remove just enough water to prevent dripping. It is then centered precisely over the drum, and the non-corded *fer* placed snugly on top (Fig. 10). The skin about the drum is then placed over the non-corded *fer*, and the corded *fer* brought carefully back over the drum, atop the skin and non-corded *fer* (Fig. 11). At this point, the final third of the cording process can be completed, until the two ends meet and must be tied. To accomplish this, the end on the right is brought through the final *noeud* of the end on the left to create the only *noeud* on the drum with three rather than two passes through itself (Fig. 12). The end on the right is then simply knotted.

Tirage

With the components of the *jembe* in place, much of the remainder of fabrication involves tightening the drumhead through a process called *tirage*. Aside from a great deal of brute force required by the body, two tools are needed to accomplish the process: a conventional pair of locking pliers (*pince*) and an iron fabricated specifically for the drum-making process (*fer à tirer*) (Fig. 13). Starting with the second cord right of the final knot created in the cording process, the iron is used to tighten the cords, bringing all of the top *fers* and *peau* further down on the body of the drum, tensioning the drumhead (Fig. 14). Once the cord is tightened, it is pinched and held in place with pliers. The slack

created by this initial pulling is weaved through four cords, at which point the tightening process is repeated using the same technique as before.

During this initial tightening process, it is helpful to visualize the head of the drum in quarters. Repeating the pulling process uniformly over each of these quarters ensures that the drumhead descends evenly, creating a clean, congruent sound across the entire drum. Though it is important to work swiftly so that the skin does not become dry, work must also be done carefully, as tightening is much easier done than undone.

With the skin descended evenly over the top of the drum, the excess cord is wrapped around its circumference to ensure that the skin stays well in place during the drying process, which should take place under the cover of shade for a minimum of four days (Fig. 15).

Trimming

After thoroughly drying, the fur on top of the *jembe* drumhead must be shaved and removed in perhaps the most tedious step of the fabrication process. The grain of the fur is aligned towards the worker and removed using a simple razor blade, scraped along the drumhead at a slight angle (Fig. 16). As a fair amount of force is required to scrape the skin clean, great care must be taken to ensure that the razor does not slip and slice the drumhead.

Uniquely, this stage of the *jembe* fabrication process also comes with a story. According to legend, if the fur of a drumhead is removed within the walls of a pregnant woman's home and she is unfortunate enough to step on the fur shavings as they gather, it is believed that her baby will grow the fur of the animal used for the drumhead.

With the drumhead smooth, the next step in the fabrication process is to remove the now hardened excess skin from around the body of the drum. This can be

accomplished using a simple pocket knife or other small, sharp blade by pulling the skin away from the drum and cutting carefully, so as to avoid accidentally slicing the cords underneath the skin.

It is noteworthy that this initial trimming serves only to give the worker easier access to work on the drum's cords, as the same process will be repeated for the purpose of aesthetics at the end of the fabrication process. At this point, the *jembe* is allowed to dry in the sun for an additional two days after its drumhead has been scraped and trimmed in preparation for the second *tirage*. Prior to being left to dry, its cords are pulled taut by hand and the excess cord wrapped around the base of the drum and tied (Fig. 17).

Second *Tirage*

The purpose of the second *tirage* is to further tension the now completely dry drumhead to the point of correct pitch. Starting at the same point as the first *tirage*, the process is completed tediously using brute force and the same technique as in the first *tirage*.

With the *jembe* tuned to its user's liking, the drumhead must again be shaved as the stretching of the drumhead during the second *tirage* has plumed the fur of the drum skin, creating stubbles which make the drum painful to play. This is also the point at which the second and final trimming of the skin around the body of the drum can be done for aesthetical purposes.

Drum Care

With the *jembe* now a functioning instrument, it must be cared for properly in order for its initial tone quality to be preserved. It is important that the drumhead remain

dry at all times, but also that it not be extendedly exposed to intense sunlight, as this can cause the drumhead to become brittle and susceptible to cracking or tearing. In more temperate climates than those common in Africa, the drum may need to be re-tightened over time. This is accomplished through a process called *accords*, weaved in out of the drums pre-existing cords in an “S” pattern and pulled tightly to further tension the drumhead.

ANALYSIS

Criticism

It wasn't long during our lessons before I noticed a pattern of harsh criticism apparent in Fa's teaching method. The common phrases used to critique my playing seemed constructed in a way intended to make me feel incompetent and inadequate as a student. Rarely, if ever, was critique “constructive.” In fact, I most often found myself taking Fa's comments to be condescending and nothing short of belittling.

In the West and prior to this study, I had only seldom encountered forms of critique other than “constructive criticism,” usually through the coaching of sports I played when I was young. The only previous experience I can recall in which I witnessed critique comparable in harshness to Fa's was in teaching methods used by the “strictest” of these coaches. Indeed, for many Westerners, and quite often myself included, internalizing criticism and proceeding to “take it personally” is practically instinctual. What I perceived in Fa's tone, however, was an interesting paradox: it was he who appeared to take my mistakes personally. Perhaps more so than the teacher's comments were intended to discontent the student, they indicated that my incorrect note or entrance out of time had somehow personally offended the teacher.

Such indications bring into focus the tremendous importance and significance the music we studied carried for my teacher. Furthermore, this sentiment seemed shared by everyone in and around the community, evident not only in their participation and observation of my lessons, but in their near constant critique of my performance. Contrary to my Western conception of critique as personal attack or belittlement, it is important to realize that it was not me, in truth, who was being criticized by my peers as I played; but rather, the critiques of those around me were intended to ensure that that quality and integrity of the music I was playing was being upheld, no matter who was playing it. Critique serves to reify the importance of the authentic preservation of these rhythms—what Fa called the “reality” of the tradition. Because these rhythms serve an important social purpose during baptisms, weddings, and many other social events, it is the instinct of the society in which they exist to preserve their content well. Indeed, it is their societal well being, which is set to be upheld. As Chernoff similarly observes during his experience, “Criticism in Africa is a measure of people’s concern that the quality of their art is intimately connected with the quality of their lives (Chernoff 1979, 36).”

Interestingly enough, by the end of our lessons, I too found myself criticizing those who were accompanying our lessons, offering my insights into what they were playing and how just as they had done weeks earlier to mine. What I discovered, however, is that the theme of critique was not focused on the individual, but on the music itself.

Sacrifice

In addition to the sacrifice of one’s hands, time, and energy required to learn the tradition of the *jembe*, I also noticed a theme of inflicted sacrifice from the teacher to the student during my time with Fa. I recall one such occasion in my field journal:

Fa criticized me this morning for not having taken home my drum, though we agreed the night before for me to leave it to be used by the students (a fellow SIT student and the brother in law/guest of an SIT professor) in the lessons scheduled for the following afternoon. [It should be noted that this lesson served as a financial favor to Fa, scheduled by me without his asking.] He then told me that I should not have left my drum outside overnight, as the morning dew is bad for the drumhead. It soaks in and makes the drum sound very flat. He told me this was my fault, and made me play the better part of the morning on the flat drum. Most of the way through our lesson, however, he taught me that a problem in tuning such as this can easily be fixed by using a stone to strike the top ring of the drum horizontally and adjust the drum's pitch. He did so, and instantly the drum sounded exactly as I had left it the night before. When I asked him why he had not shown me this solution earlier, he simply smiled, laughed, and dismissed my question.

Evidently, there exists a process of labor intended to be necessarily endured by students in order to acquire the rhythms of the *jembe*. As Fa assured me, "*Il faut sacrifier pour être un maître*. [One must sacrifice in order to be a teacher.] (Cissokho 2008). The idea of forced individual sacrifice is too reinforced by Fa's comment that the *jembe* cannot be learned with any type of effectiveness in a group setting. One must wonder what the perceived importance of this tradition would be if it came for "free." As constant challenges—both those inherent to the learning process and those intentionally posed by the teacher—befall the student, the permanent higher place of the rhythms than those who study them is reinforced; in essence, the sacrifices required of the student by the pedagogical process assert the music's higher place than the musician.

Who's Counting?

Fa advised me to listen to the audio recordings of rhythms of we had made with near constancy. In addition to each rhythm carrying with it a "sprit," it became apparent in the course of our lessons that grasping this sense is nothing short of integral to even being able to play rhythms properly. There are precise emphases which fall on very specific notes, necessitating the mastery of the differences in the three tones of the *jembe*, particularly the subtle difference between the *tonique* and the *clacqué*. Without this

accentuation, the rhythm indeed fails to be a rhythm. There is a sense for each rhythm which **must** be felt, and internalized with repetition. I found this to be the true sense of the music Fa taught me: Playing West African music involves **feeling** rhythm, not narrowly possessing the ability to play rhythms correctly on an instrument. To illustrate the difference between this African sensibility and the Western sensibility I entered our lessons with, the following is an excerpt from my field journal:

I noticed today that two accompaniments to two different rhythms were essentially the same aside from their difference in tempo and accentuation. When I suggested my thought to Fa, however, he abruptly asked whether I thought going to eat and going to the bathroom were the same thing. The intention—to go—is the same, but the cause, he explained, is entirely different. In the same manner, the intent for both parts is to play, but the two accompaniments, which sounded almost identical to my Western ears, were as comparable to an African as eating and using the toilet.

In our eleventh three-hour lesson, during which I became so frustrated with the solos of the rhythm “*Maracadon*,” that I nearly felt compelled to quit my drum entirely, I finally asked Fa to stop counting the rhythm as I attempted to play it. It was at this point that I finally captured “The Sense” Fa had been preaching to me for more than two weeks. All of a sudden, my shoulders began to sway in time and I played a rhythm with fluidity which had eluded me for the better part of an entire week. Giving appropriate advice to which I perhaps should have heeded a bit sooner, Chernoff states that, “A Westerner who wishes to understand African music must begin with a recognition of his own fundamental attitudes about music so that he may adjust to a fundamentally different conception (Chernoff 2008, 33).” It is the task of the *jembe* musician to play rhythms authentically, but to play West African music is to feel, not to count.

CONCLUSION

“*On est ensemble.* [We are together.]”

I ultimately came to realize that the purpose of nearly all Fa’s instruction was to better my performance together with other parts. I learned that the *jembe* is taken as a means within its tradition—an instrument used to produce one part of the whole of a complex rhythm. During our lessons, Fa instructed me to play both *dundun* and *jembe* parts because he intended to teach me **rhythms**, not single parts to rhythms as they are manifest on only one instrument in an ensemble. As its polyrhythmic structure necessitates, West African music depends entirely on the togetherness of its many different parts (Chernoff 1979). Accordingly, I found togetherness to be the cultural value reflected most brightly in the teaching process of this musical tradition, demonstrated by my instructor’s emphasis on learning all the parts of a rhythm, even those played on instruments other than the “one” I was studying.

Togetherness is indeed at the very core of the value system present in the *jembe* pedagogical process within its native West African context. In the same manner in which the many parts of each rhythm depend on their counterparts for support and structure in creating a musical sense of coalescence, a student of the *jembe* must rely on his instructor for guidance in discovering the whole of a rhythm and its sense, rather than only the technique used to master its individual parts. Plainly, if the people of the neighborhood near Fa’s home would have seen me practicing alone each day in the garden with my voice recorder and been unaware that I was studying together with a *maître*, they probably would have thought I was a crazy person. Both the music itself produced by the *jembe* and the process by which the instrument is taught are constituted by a dependence on togetherness.

Furthermore, the criticisms of my teacher, fellow lesson participants, and observers were above all recognitions of my presence and participation in the learning process of this tradition. To participate without others, I came to learn, is indeed to not participate at all. Rather, as postulated above, to try and learn the *jembe* tradition alone is to study foolishly and without sense. In an African context, as Chernoff concludes, “Individuality is related to participation, and in the complex relationships of an African community context, character is understood as a sense of one’s relationship to others, as a continuing style of involvement and making do, and hence as a focus for moral judgments (Chernoff 1979, 166).” This helps to justify the success of discovery I enjoyed in my research as a simple result of my eagerness to participate in the activities of the community who welcomed me as its guest. In effect, extending a curious cultural hand towards the community I worked in was perceived and embraced as an expressive gesture of my desire to learn together, an impulse I found entirely necessary to exhibit when endeavoring to learn and play West African music.

Preservation

Perhaps even more significant than a student’s dependence on his teacher to learn the tradition of the *jembe* is the dependence of the tradition itself on the teaching of the student for continued preservation. To learn the *jembe* is to learn a way of being—to reflect rhythms which have become a part of one’s musical self on an instrument which functions as a communicative limb. In Fa’s analogy of the drum’s continual presence to the role of president, his emphasis on the musician’s temporal nature alludes to how greatly the preservation of the *jembe* tradition depends on being taught rather than known. The goal of the pedagogical process is to teach more than rhythms to a student; in addition, a student must also be taught **how** rhythms are to be known. During the process,

the student is at once trained **and** taught **to** train—to fulfill his obligation to the tradition which inevitably depends on him giving, rather than retaining his musical knowledge. This explains why Fa referred to me as often during our time together in the future tense as a *petit maître* as he did in the present tense as a student.

Even before the start of our lesson period, I was forewarned that Fa's grandmother would be able to know if I played a rhythm incorrectly during our lessons. It is clear that this musical tradition is designed to be passed down through constant exposure, evident in the perpetual encouragement of the presence of children as instruments are being played. With this in mind, it comes with little surprise that the grandmother of a *griot* family, who has quite likely never even played a *jembe*, is able to detect imperfections in its rhythms as they are played. Fa continually emphasized the importance of listening repeatedly to our audio recordings because rhythms are designed within this system of pedagogy to become part of the musician through repetition. As the teacher passes on the tradition he has come to know, he recognizes the greater importance of the music being taught to the student than it being known by the teacher. It is not the role of the musician to become part of the tradition, as previously discussed, occurs when one attempts to change or "better" rhythms as they are played. Rather, the musician's role is to pass on authentically the rhythms that have become a part of him through his own learning. In so doing, he reaffirms both his temporal standing within the tradition and the greater importance of the long-term preservation of the tradition than the musician's immediate knowledge of it. Ultimately, the musician contributes himself to the music, making the final sacrifice required for the preservation of its tradition: teaching.

Further Study

I feel incredibly fortunate and privileged to have been given the ability to learn in solidarity with a culture so rich in musical tradition and kindness towards strangers. The bittersweet part of this experience is certainly that I had time enough only to learn a small fraction of what my instructor was willing to teach me. Though I feel a great sense of satisfaction for all we were able to accomplish together, it is my unfortunate regret that I did not have enough time to learn more from this exceptional musician and person, who became both my teacher and friend in the course of our time together.

GLOSSARY

accords—Process used to tighten a *jembe* after initial fabrication. Accomplished using an “S” pattern of weaving tensioned in and out of a drum’s pre-existing cords.

appelle—French for “call.” Here used in reference to the beginning part or “call” of each *jembe* rhythm. Rhythms normally have only one call, though there are some exceptions which have two.

audiate—The process of thinking music. To audiate is to hear and comprehend music that is not physically present, just as to think is to hear and give meaning to language, the sound of words not physically present (Martin 2008).

bass—One of the three tones of the *jembe*, created by striking the middle of the drumhead open-handed with fingers clenched.

bois—French for “wood.” Here used in reference to the wooden body of a *jembe*.

clacqué—One of the three tones of the *jembe*, created by striking the drum ten centimeters from its rim open-handed with fingers spread apart.

dimbe—Wolof for the French word “*teck*” used colloquially to refer to the type of wood most commonly used in *jembe* as well as mask and figurine fabrication in Senegal.

dundun—Set of two or three floor drums used most commonly to accompany the rhythms of the *jembe* in performance as well as practice.

fer—French for “iron.” Here used in reference to the three iron rings which form the aperture by which the drumhead of the *jembe* is mounted and tensioned.

fer à tirer—Iron instrument fabricated specifically for the *jembe* fabrication process. Used in the *tirage* process to apply brute tension on the cords of the drum.

lengé—A lightly-colored hardwood from Mali used commonly as the body of a *jembe*.

maître—French for “teacher.” Here used in reference to a *jembe* instructor, or drum master.

menuiserie—French for “workshop.” Here used in reference to woodshops.

montage—French for “assembly.” Here used in reference to the assembly process of the *jembe*, or the mounting of the drumhead.

nim—A typically light-weight hardwood found throughout West Africa and commonly used for *jembe* construction.

noeud—French for “knot.” Here used in reference to the primary knot used in the *jembe* fabrication process.

peau—French for “skin.” Here used in reference to the drumhead of the *jembe*.

pince—French for “pliers.” Here used in reference to typical locking pliers.

tirage—French for “circulation.” Here used in reference to the tightening process of the *jembe* during initial assembly.

tonique—One of the three tones of the *jembe*, created by striking the drum five centimeters from its rim close-handed with fingers clenched.

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