

“CUBAN MUSIC IS AFRICAN MUSIC”: NEGOTIATING AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA ON THE WORLD MUSIC STAGE¹

by

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Discussing the Senegalese band Orchestra Baobab’s incorporation of Cuban music, guitarist and band member Latfi Benjeloune told me, “The music didn’t come home and influence African music. Cuban music is already African. These are African sensibilities that are being expressed...in some ways we felt like parents with this music...it came from us” (Interview, 25 October 2011). Here, Benjeloune justifies his musical mixing by positioning himself in relation to the black Atlantic and African and Afro-diasporic peoples. Making musical and cultural connections across the black Atlantic is not a new phenomenon. African and Afro-diasporic musicians have long shared and taken up each other’s musics, be it funk, jazz or rumba. The dynamics of musical mixing, however, have varied widely and have been affected by power relations, histories, cultural understandings and misunderstandings, as well as by access to technology, the workings of the music industry, and distribution networks.

In this article I look at the ways in which musicians approach and position themselves in relation to musical mixing and collaboration across the black Atlantic by examining the viewpoints of artists in two world music groups: Orchestra Baobab, a Senegalese band that blends Cuban and Senegalese musics, and AfroCubism, a collaboration between seven Cuban and six Malian musicians. As they creatively combine African and Cuban musics, Orchestra Baobab and AfroCubism artists negotiate and reimagine the connections between African and Afro-diasporic peoples, between Cuban, Senegalese and Malian cultures and histories, as well as between themselves and the global world music industry. These cultures, histories, and peoples do not, however, always come together nicely, or sometimes at all. The divergent ideas and contradictions that emerge as musicians connect across the black Atlantic offer insight into the ways musicians approach musical collaboration and mixing in strategic, pragmatic, and idealistic ways. The paper is based on fieldwork with these groups in 2011 and 2012, both while on tour with them in Europe and North America and visiting them at home in Mali and Senegal.

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The New Oxford American Dictionary defines collaboration as “the action of working with someone to produce or create something” (3rd ed., s.v. “collaboration”). There are two parts to this definition: the act of working together with others and the creation of an end product. In her book *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005), Anna Tsing writes about collaboration as united labor and as cooperation that is often imbued with misunderstandings and incompatibilities. She writes that despite the fact that people work together to achieve a common goal, they often see their labour and the reasons for undertaking it quite differently. Less interested in the product itself than the creative and at times confused labour behind it, Tsing asserts that one should look at the “the messy and surprising features” of connections across difference in order to understand cultural production (2005: 3). She argues: “Cultures are continually co-produced in the interactions I call ‘friction’: the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (2005: 4). Exploring these differences and the ways in which they affect the ways people work together, Tsing asks: “Where does incompatibility make a difference?” (2005: 262). She writes, “Collaboration [is] not consensus making but rather an opening for productive confusion” (2005: 247). The frictions that emerge as people collaborate and connect across difference are productive. Examining the frictions in musical mixing and collaboration helps us understand the various ways musicians understand their own identities and positions in the black Atlantic, the world music industry and the world more generally. In my analysis, I apply Tsing’s ideas about collaboration to the labour that West African and Cuban musicians engage in to get along and play music with each other, and, more broadly, to the labour involved in mixing different types of musics together. Actively playing music with others and consciously combining musics of different origins are two forms of collaboration: they both involve two or more parts working together to create something else.

In her examination of Paul Simon’s 1986 album *Graceland*, Louise Meintjes writes that “understanding collaboration is an evaluative interpretive move” (Meintjes 1990: 38). In this paper I examine the interpretive moves that Orchestra Baobab and AfroCubism musicians make as they negotiate the “frictions” of global connections in their musical collaboration and mixing across the black Atlantic. Musicians variously assert essentialist claims about black Atlantic peoples and cultures, anti-essentialist claims about their own distinct identities, and universalist claims about the nature of music and culture more generally. They engage with these different aspects of musical mixing in order to signify different elements of their identity as they present themselves variously as modern, cosmopolitan, Malian, Senegalese, Cuban, traditional, flexible, and virtuosic musicians for both each other and foreign audiences. Orchestra Baobab and AfroCubism musicians are strategic in their combining of music and social meanings, idealistic in their belief in their ability to connect people and musics across the Atlantic, and pragmatic in that they work together to achieve success in the music industry. The positions musicians take are not so much in tension, but in constant productive friction. As they rub up against one another, Cuban, Senegalese, and Malian

musics acquire new meanings, and musicians reconstruct and re-imagine the black Atlantic, global connections and mixing.

Orchestra Baobab

Orchestra Baobab was founded in 1970 in Dakar at a time when Senegal was establishing itself as an independent nation following its independence from France in 1960. Cuban music was extraordinarily popular during this time and Orchestra Baobab became known for its mix of Senegalese and Cuban musics. After becoming one of the most popular bands in Dakar in the 1970s the band broke up in the 1980s. In 2001, at the instigation of a few British world music producers, Baobab reunited. The band has since released several new albums and has been touring Europe and North America regularly. In their mixing of Senegalese and Cuban musics, Baobab musicians mark themselves and their music as distinctly Senegalese, and as modern and cosmopolitan, as open to and aware of the world.

Baobab musicians are proud of the ways in which their music is uniquely Senegalese. The band does not use traditional instruments, but it does have two traditional vocalists. According to singer Rudy Gomis, Baobab plays “traditional music that we have salsized” (Interview, 19 October 2011). Guitarist Yahya Fall concurred:

We needed to bring something of ourselves. A touch. This Senegalese spirit—it’s what we brought into it...The rhythms were Afro-Cuban but the melodies—we put in Senegalese



Figure 1. *Songlines* cover featuring Orchestra Baobab from November 2007. From left, Rudy Gomis, Thierno Koité, Mountaga Koité (seated), Assane Mboup, Barthélemy Atisso, Balla Sidibé, Charly N’Diaye, N’Diouga Dieng, Latfi Benjeloune, Issa Cissoko

melodies. [The song] “Pape N’Diaye” that’s a Senegalese melody. And we put in percussion as if it was salsa with the Senegalese touch. (Interview, 13 October 2011²)

Despite the fact that Cuban music was incredibly popular at the time of Senegalese independence, a nationalist movement emphasizing local over foreign music was also growing in the 1960s and ‘70s. Baobab followed this trend, promoting Senegalese nationalism in its incorporation of traditional musical elements. At the same time, however, Senegal’s first president, Léopold Senghor continued to hold French culture and institutions in high esteem (see Counsel, 2006). A regard for French institutions and a belief in their innate modernity and worldliness is still quite alive in Baobab musicians’ discussions of their respect for Western music, instruments, and education. However, the modernity and worldliness that French music, instruments, and education was once associated with has also been transferred onto Cuban music.

Despite their desire to portray themselves as distinctly Senegalese, Baobab musicians were also somewhat ambivalent about using traditional Senegalese music as they looked to mark themselves as modern and cosmopolitan. In discussions of traditional *sabar* drumming (also referred to here as “tam tams”) Yahya Fall (guitarist) and Balla Sidibé (percussionist) told me,

That’s what made them [Baobab] unique. Baobab didn’t put in *sabar*, didn’t put in anything. It was music. It was a guitar, a melody, a guitar with a lot of reverb and delay... That was the Baobab. (Fall Interview, 13 October 2011)

When there are too many instruments on stage, it becomes cacophony.... You only hear the *tam tam*. We want when we play for people to say “solo guitar, that’s what he’s doing; accompaniment, that’s what he’s doing”... It needs to be clean. (Sidibé Interview, 30 October 2011)

Although today many members of the band are from griot families, this fact is rarely even mentioned in performances abroad. For band members, rhetorically distancing Baobab from traditional musics allows the band to be read as modern, international and cosmopolitan.

Baobab musicians talked glowingly about Cubans as educated and able to read music, and they discussed Cuban music as cultivated, structured, clear, and rehearsed. They associated their own group with these qualities, calling their music “intellectual,” “well-poised,” and “correct,” and they called their Western and Cuban instrumentation “modern.” Emphasizing the composed nature of Baobab’s music, N’Diouga Dieng told me, “there’s no improvisation in Baobab... When we prepare pieces, we prepare. For one week we work on it” (Interview, 26 October 2011). Yahya Fall told me that Cubans, “when they play, the music is so clear, neat. But with [Senegalese music], with everything that we put in the music, we don’t arrive at this color, this simplicity, this light music” (Interview 26 October 2011). For Baobab musicians, the qualities that came with Cuban music made the band modern, cosmopolitan, and accessible to an international audience.

² Pape N’Diaye on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gucuMVy__UE

Baobab musicians use Cuban music to mark themselves as being at home in the world in many of the same ways that privileged Europeans and Americans do. They talk about their use of Cuban music as a way to spice things up a bit, in the same way many European and American musicians talk about engaging with African music. Just as the French visit Senegal to take in its culture when and how they wanted, Baobab musicians dabble in Cuban music and use it in ways that are enriching to them. Following Ulf Hannerz’s description of cosmopolitanism, Baobab musicians “embrace the alien culture, but ...[they know] where the exit is” (1990: 240). Despite the fact that Baobab musicians take up the cosmopolitan approaches most associated with former colonizing powers, they also make a point of maintaining their distance from the colonial associations of Western-dominated cosmopolitanism. Gomis made the distinction as follows:

We don’t colonize a culture. We can use a culture. You can take rock and do something else with it, but you’ll always understand where it came from... We try to return to this culture that our grandparents brought somewhere. We try to add something else. (Interview, 19 October 2011)

The cosmopolitanism that they engage in, however, is a cosmopolitanism outside of whiteness, outside of colonialism. It is not directed by or dependent upon Europeans or Americans. Gomis told me, “We needed something that wasn’t our folklore but that was close to our folklore. That’s why cha cha cha came here to Africa.... Before you could go in a bar and you danced tango, waltz, pasa doble. It was too white, too *toubab*”³ (Interview, 19 October 2011). Baobab musicians engage in a cosmopolitanism associated with other African peoples and with successful struggles against imperialism. Bob White, in his study of Afro-Cuban music in the Belgian Congo, found a similar phenomenon. He writes that in taking up Cuban music, the Congolese created an alternative cosmopolitanism:

Afro-Cuban music became popular in the Congo not only because it retained formal elements of “traditional” African musical performance, but also because it stood for a form of urban cosmopolitanism that was more accessible—and ultimately more pleasurable—than the various models of European cosmopolitanism which circulated in the Belgian colonies in Africa. (White 2002: 663)

White (2002) and Richard Shain (2009) have written, respectively, that the Belgian Congo and Senegal have embraced Afro-Cuban music as a marker of both an elite international status for individual musicians and, on a national level, as belonging to an international community of nations in their own right (i.e., not through their former colonizing nations, Belgium and France).

Cuban music is not only a marker of modernity and cosmopolitanism; it is also an African music that Baobab musicians are reclaiming. N’Diouga Dieng explained,

³ *Toubab* is the word commonly used in Mali and Senegal to refer to white people.

“They say Afro-Cuban because it comes from here” (Interview, 26 October 2011). For Baobab musicians, Cuban music and African music are linked, not simply through the history of the slave trade, but by blood and by family. Cuban music is a part of them, a part of being Senegalese. Although these comments can be read as opening the door to essentialist readings of African and Afro-diasporic peoples, they also allow for, as Paul Gilroy puts it, the “powerful, populist affirmation of black culture” (1991: 125). He argues that denying essentialist positions “is tantamount to ignoring the undiminished power of racism itself and forsaking the mass of black people who continue to comprehend their lived particularity through what it does to them” (1991: 126). In their comments concerning Cuban music’s origins, Baobab musicians simultaneously assert their belonging to a history of black Atlantic exchange and marginalization and they lay claim to a music that they know has become popular worldwide. As bassist Charly N’Diaye asserted, “I think that salsa is an African music first.... Salsa is typically African” (Interview 19 October 2011). Balla Sidibé also thought that “those who sing salsa, they come from Africa” (Interview, 30 October 2011).

As they mix Senegalese and Cuban music Baobab musicians make strategic moves as they negotiate the frictions between their Senegalese identities and their international connections by aligning themselves with the greater struggle of marginalized and colonized peoples around the black Atlantic while also emphasizing their cosmopolitanism, modernity, and distinct national character.

AfroCubism

AfroCubism is a group created by the world music producer Nick Gold specifically for the world music industry in 2008. This industry-driven collaboration between seven Cuban and six Malian musicians was originally supposed to have taken place in Cuba in 1996, but was postponed when the Malian musicians were not able to make the trip to Cuba. Already in Cuba with a recording space booked, Gold and Ry Cooder developed the Buena Vista Social Club project instead. Often dubbed “Buena Vista Take Two,” AfroCubism released an album in 2010 and has been touring Europe, Canada, and the United States since then. Because AfroCubism is such a young group that will likely be rather short-lived, musicians were most interested in the quick success of the group and their own professional futures when it came to discussing the musical collaboration. Musicians promoted this collaboration as a natural product of black Atlantic connections, and they discussed both the unique traditions that they brought to the group, and the ways in which this collaboration marked them as worldly, flexible, and adaptable musicians, ready for the next professional opportunity.

Toumani Diabaté, a master kora player and leader of AfroCubism, is both a heavily invested fan and a skeptic of world music collaborations. When I visited him in his Bamako studio in 2012, he told me how he felt about the large number of transnational world music collaborations on the scene today:

Ninety-eight per cent of ... Western musicians are inspired by African music now—are



Figure 2. Seven of the thirteen members of AfroCubism, from left, Djelimady Tounkara, Toumani Diabaté, Eliades Ochoa, Lassana Diabaté, José Angel Martinez, Bassékou Kouyaté, Kassé Mady Diabaté. Photo by Christina Jaspars, from *Songlines*, October 2010.

inspired by Indian music, Chinese music. That is to say that they are inspired by the countries that have kept their culture—countries that are culturally well known in this world. So I want the sharing to be equal. That they don't steal the authority and the notoriety of these African musicians or these musicians that come from the cultural countries in the world to say that “yes your music is world music because there was a Manu Chao⁴ behind it, because there was a European or American star in it.” (Interview, 25 February 2012)

Diabaté insisted, however, that AfroCubism was “completely equitable. It's another story because Eliades Ochoa [AfroCubism guitarist and a former member of the Buena Vista Social Club] isn't European, isn't American” (Interview, 25 February 2012). For band members, AfroCubism is a collaboration involving musicians from the global south who encounter the power dynamics of the world music industry in comparable ways.

Connecting across the black Atlantic was a strategic move for both Malian and Cuban musicians not only because it was attractive to world music audiences, but also because it brought these musicians new audiences. In collaborating, the members of AfroCubism can draw new audiences from each other's fan bases. The Malians could attract the multitudes of Buena Vista Social Club fans, and the Cubans could draw from the large numbers of fans of West African music.

Musicians often naturalized the musical mixing they were engaging in by emphasizing connections between Cubans and Malians, positioning themselves as worldly and connected and their music as accessible and appealing to a greater number of people. Toumani Diabaté told me that AfroCubism is “an encounter of two brothers from two families...Cuba comes from Mali....Two worlds were separated and they have come together again to form another world” (Interview, 25 February 2012). Musicians also naturalize this collaboration by pointing out similarities between the two musics. Lassana Diabaté explained, “Cuban music is close to Malian music. There

⁴ A French pop star who has collaborated with the Malian duo Amadou and Mariam.

are the melodies that are there. You see [the song] ‘A la Luna’—you could play this like [our song] ‘Jarabi’” (Interview, 25 July 2011).⁵ Lassana continued to explain how he was able to connect with the traditional Cuban music because “It’s like something that comes from Africa... We feel like when we listen to it, you find your part” (Interview, 25 July 2011).

In working with each other, band members often point to differences in their musics, their approaches to playing and to their adaptability. Malian musicians claim to be more flexible, compromising and open to diverse musics than their Cuban counterparts. In asserting their openness toward foreign music and their desire to work with it, enrich it and adapt to differences, Malian musicians mark themselves as cosmopolitan, flexible and good candidates for another collaboration. Toumani Diabaté explained, “we [Maliens] can adapt to everything. We are here because we don’t play only Malian music. We decided to adapt. That made the success of AfroCubism” (Interview, 25 February 2012). Lassana claimed that the Malian artists are more flexible because Malian music is itself diverse. He told me, “every time we do a collaboration with another music, whatever music, you will find that... everything that you give us, even if it’s not in our blood ... there is another ethnicity in Mali that does the same thing” (Interview 25 July 2011). For Toumani, Malians have been exposed to such a wealth of different musics in Mali that they can play anything. He asserted, “I can mix with anyone... electronic music, flamenco music [etc.]” (Interview, 25 February 2012).

The Cubans, who all get regular work with the Grupo Patria, did not feel the same need to emphasize their adaptability, as they were not actively looking for a new gig. For them, this was an experience that provided new ideas they could add to their repertoire. Bassist José Angel Martínez told me, “it’s a beautiful experience for me because I am in front of this different culture with my music ... I will take away new things” (Interview, 27 July 2011). Conga player Jorge “Coly” Maturell explained that he really loves the collaboration because he learns so much from it. For him, it is stimulating. He learns African rhythms and figures out how they relate to Cuban rhythms. He told me, for example, that the rumba rhythm relates to a Malian rhythm the group has been doing and that African rhythms are often more subdivided than Cuban ones. Although they did not actively assert their cosmopolitanism as the Malians did when talking with me, the Cuban musicians are open to new musics, are excited about learning new styles and sometimes casually bring up possibilities for future creative projects.

The Malian and Cuban musicians all discuss their strategies for adapting and working out differences in the group. Ngoni player Bassekou Kouyaté comments that he has had to adapt his playing quite a bit because, in his view, Cuban music is more rigid:

I don’t normally play like this. Since we’ve started I haven’t really played. It’s annoying. We’re not 100 per cent comfortable. It’s always like this. [You need to] adapt with people. It’s

⁵ “Jarabi” is a traditional Malian love song. Note the Cuban counter melody. “A la Luna” is a song by Eliades Ochoa. Jarabi on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjUgmTuisnU>; A la Luna on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwhBpB9zvLU>

completely different, opposed to what I do. My music isn't like this. Everyone has changed a little bit. I have changed a lot. We have the possibility to change quickly, but the Cubans, to change towards us, it will be difficult. The Cubans are used to doing their music like this. The rumba and things like that. They have changed a little towards us, but not a lot, just a little. (Interview, 24 July 2011)

Kouyaté's comment also hints at one of the reasons AfroCubism is unlikely to be a long-lasting group. Many of the members have their own groups and projects that they are in charge of, in which they are the soloists and have more freedom musically. They are not used to working with such a large, complex and unwieldy group, and it is difficult for many of the Malian musicians to put aside their roles as bandleaders. When I observed them in performance, there was constant competition on stage for solos, as stars used to being the main attraction vied for centre stage.

Like the Malians, the Cubans were also not always completely content with the collaboration. Guitarist Osnel Odit Bavastro told me that he felt as if the Malians were at times more interested in their solos and improvisations than in playing with the Cuban musicians. Martinez told me more matter-of-factly that he has had to change and simplify some aspects of his playing (much as the Malians have told me that they've done):

I can't play *Cubano* Cubano. I have to do an adaption because when we mix they have their touches as well and I can't play exactly Cubano—to be able to meld with them. I have to eliminate some things that I do. Sometimes I tap in the bass. I can't do that as much. (Interview, 27 July 2011)

This dynamic of Malian soloists and Cuban support was closely tied to the different ways in which band members treated and viewed their music. Generally, Cuban members characterized the Malians as much more interested in improvisation and long solos while the Cubans were more attached to definite song structures and working together as a support group for whoever was soloing. Problems would arise because the Malians' solos and improvisations interfered with Cubans' fixed song structure. Toumani observed,

In Malian music it's improvisation, but in Cuban music it's not this at all. Cubans take a rhythm and they continue on this. The guitarist does some riffs. But the Cubans learned that the Malian musicians ... do improvisation ... [and] we learned that you can also do music without a lot of improvisation. (Interview, 25 February 2012)

Similarly, Bavastro told me, “we harmonize them more ... but they have an impressive melodic and rhythmic strength. This precisely is the strength of AfroCubism: the recombination of the African rhythms arrived in Cuba and their re-nourishment” (Interview 24 July 2011). In this way, differences in musical labour—that is, frictions—have been both a source of mutual frustration and highly productive.

Explaining the group dynamics, Toumani told me, “people didn't have the same compartment. We don't live with the same realities” (Interview, 25 February 2012). Despite these interpersonal and intercultural frictions, musicians were often insistent

upon explaining how they overcame differences. Toumani told me, “up to the present, the Cubans and the Malians can’t communicate. We learned words, but we can’t speak verbally. But musically we speak.... I want this uniqueness communicated about AfroCubism” (Interview, 25 February 2012). Using the same linguistic trope, Lassana concurred: “we don’t speak the same language, but it’s the musical language that guides us. You need to respect this” (Interview, 24 2011). Despite some disagreements about sound levels, mics and solos, as Bavastro pointed out, in the end, the musicians worked together because they all wanted the group to work: “Even though we are talking about different cultures ... there is only one objective: that AfroCubism works.... There’s a desire that things go well. I feel like we’re asking for the same thing.... The base of coexistence is respect.... The musicians respect each other” (Interview, 24 July 2011).

Conclusion

Debra Klein writes, “Strategic collaboration is ... the art of occupying and performing one’s status position so as to facilitate a common project” (Klein 2007: xxv). Because collaboration always involves working with others in order to produce something new, successful collaboration is inherently strategic. People need to position themselves in specific ways to work with different people and musics to create a product. However, while Orchestra Baobab and AfroCubism musicians position themselves so as to facilitate a common project, they also strategically position themselves with an eye toward furthering their own careers, representing themselves in authentic ways and asserting political and ideological positions. Collaboration and musical mixing allow these musicians to make these moves in new and more complex ways.

Musicians in Orchestra Baobab and AfroCubism strategically connect with other Afro-diasporic peoples and cultures while maintaining their distinct identities and career goals. They at once highlight the traditions of African and Afro-diasporic musicians, the long history of musical exchange and cosmopolitan musical exchange and an image of themselves and their cultures as modern, international and forward looking. They play for themselves and for world music audiences. They play to represent themselves to the world, to make a place for themselves in the world, to make a living and to produce something creatively and professionally rewarding.

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