

# “Cuban Music is African Music”: Productive Frictions in the World Music Industry

ALEYSIA K. WHITMORE

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*Abstract: This paper examines the ways in which Orchestra Baobab and AfroCubism, two bands that combine West African and Cuban musics, negotiate musical mixing across the black Atlantic. Looking at the frictions between different musical sounds and meanings, I explore the ways in which musicians re-imagine and reconstruct the black Atlantic and their own identities as they creatively combine Cuban and African musics. I argue that musicians are strategic in their combining of music and social meanings, idealistic in their belief in connecting people and musics across the Atlantic and pragmatic in their discussions of the limits of musical mixing and collaboration.*

*Résumé : Cet article se penche sur les différentes manières dont Orchestra Baobab et AfroCubism, deux groupes qui allient les musiques de l’Afrique de l’Ouest et de Cuba, négocient le mélange musical de part et d’autre de l’Atlantique noir. En examinant les frictions entre les différents sons et sens musicaux, j’examine la manière dont les musiciens ré-imaginent et reconstruisent l’Atlantique noir et leurs propres identités, en combinant avec créativité les musiques africaines et cubaines. J’avance que les musiciens sont tacticiens lorsqu’ils combinent musique et significations sociales ; idéalistes quant à leur sentiment de relier les gens et les musiques de part et d’autre de l’Atlantique ; et pragmatiques lorsqu’ils discutent des limites du mélange musical et de la collaboration.*

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**D**iscussing 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, October 25, 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 paper 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 re-imagine 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. This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork with these groups conducted in 2011 and 2012 while I accompanied them on tour in Europe and North America and visited them at their homes in Mali and Senegal.

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 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 labour 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 (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”

(4). Exploring these differences and the ways in which they affect the ways people work together, Tsing asks: “Where does incompatibility make a difference?” (262). She writes, “Collaboration [is] not consensus making but rather an opening for productive confusion” (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.

The frictions that emerge in Orchestra Baobab and AfroCubism musicians’ negotiations of musical mixing and collaboration are situated in the specific dynamics of the black Atlantic. Paul Gilroy writes that the black Atlantic is a “rhizomorphic” formation that evokes the image of a ship in motion, highlighting the circulation of ideas, peoples and products (1993: 4). I argue that these frictions are situated in this circulation, in the “routes” that people have travelled around the black Atlantic; the histories of cultural, political and economic exchanges; and the identities that people claim as they position themselves within these routes, histories and exchanges. Gilroy recognizes the frictions that emerge in the circulation of ideas, peoples and products in his discussion of black expressive culture as a “changing same” (1991:131). He explains that understanding culture in this way

involves the difficult task of striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but in the breaks and interruptions that suggest that the invocation of tradition may itself be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilizing flux of the postcontemporary world. New “traditions” are invented in the jaws of modern experience, and new conceptions of modernity are produced in the long shadow of our enduring traditions—the African ones and the ones forged from the slave experience that the black vernacular so powerfully and actively remembers. (126)

For him, recognizing this changing same is a way of working against essentialist views of black expressive culture by understanding culture as something that, while it retains elements of old, “enduring traditions,” is always changing, inventing new “traditions.” Gilroy argues that understanding culture as a changing same allows for, as Tsing calls it, productive confusion. In ways I explore in detail later on, members of Orchestra Baobab and AfroCubism variously draw on ideas of African culture as a “fixed essence” and develop new discourses that reflect their experiences of postcolonial modernity and the world music industry.

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. After offering some historical background on Cuban music in Africa, I will examine Orchestra Baobab’s and then AfroCubism’s approaches to musical mixing and collaboration.

## Historical Introduction

Slave traders, slaves themselves, and colonial military personnel were the first to facilitate musical exchange between the Caribbean and coastal cities in West Africa as they travelled back and forth across the Atlantic. The slave trade in Cuba began in the 16th century, increased in the 18th century as the labour-intensive sugar industry grew on the island, and continued through the 19th

century (Shain 2002: 84-87). In the 1920s, newly founded record companies began marketing and distributing Cuban music in Africa, hoping to open a new market for their goods. Following the success of these first Cuban records, from 1933 to 1958, the Gramophone Company distributed a series of recordings of Latin American music (the “GV series”) that became extremely popular across the continent (Fargion 2004: 2). Cuban-influenced genres such as the mambo were also incorporated into the international ballroom dance scene in European urban centres in the early 20th century, and European colonizers brought this popular music with them when they came to Africa (Shain 2002: 89). Especially in francophone West Africa, the French colonizers shared their enthusiasm for Cuban music over the radio, making the genre accessible to large audiences (Shain 2002: 88).

In the second half of the 20th century, Cubans themselves brought their music to the African continent. After the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the Cuban government became actively involved in politics on the African continent, developing a mission to aid African nations in their fight against imperialism. Hoping to form a coalition of third-world nations that would oppose imperialist powers, Fidel Castro developed diplomatic ties with many newly independent African nations and sent thousands of aid workers, teachers and diplomats to various African countries in the 1960s and 1970s (Marshall 1993: 50). By 1978, there were approximately 11,000 Cuban civilians working in sub-Saharan Africa, and Cuban bands were touring the continent extensively (Marshall 1993: 50). Cuban music came to be associated with the history of the slave trade, African roots, French colonizers and anti-imperialist politics of the global south.

West African musicians began playing covers of Cuban music in the early part of the 20th century, commonly copying Cuban tunes they had heard on recordings and on the radio. After gaining independence in the 1950s and 1960s, many African nations, including Senegal and Mali, started promoting local cultural practices and developing “national” culture. In the 1970s, affected by these growing nationalist movements, bands playing Cuban genres such as the Senegalese Orchestra Baobab and the Malian Badema National started incorporating their local languages and musical idioms into their music. Today, Cuban-African music born in the 1970s does not have large audiences in Senegal and Mali, but has gained traction in the world music scene. Since 2001, Orchestra Baobab has been playing extensively in Europe and North America, and world music producers have begun developing new bands combining African and Latin American musics specifically for the world music scene, such as the groups Africando and AfroCubism.

## Orchestra Baobab

Orchestra Baobab was founded in 1970 in Dakar at a time when Senegal was establishing itself as a new nation following its independence from France in 1960. Like many African nations that had recently gained independence from European colonial powers, Senegal set about developing nationalist policies that promoted local cultural practices and cultivated nationalist sentiment. The country's first president, Léopold Senghor, was a strong proponent of Négritude, a philosophical and literary movement meant to develop pride in African culture and arts. Ndiouga Benga writes,

From independence to the early 1980s, Senghor's ideology of Négritude prevailed in Senegal.... This excitement for cultural identity also affected the artists.... Music bands had to uphold national languages through relevant compositions and adaptation. Another objective was to create an authentic local music as was being done in Zaïre and Guinea. (2002: 78)

As president, Senghor hoped to instill pride in Senegalese culture through support of traditional arts. Like his neighbours President Modibo Keita of Mali and President Sekou Touré of Guinea, Senghor encouraged the creation of institutions celebrating national culture such as Le Ballet National du Sénégal and the Semaines de la Jeunesse (sports and arts competitions; Counsel 2009: 151-53). Senghor differentiated himself, however, from Keita and Touré as a scholar and leader who, while celebrating his nation's independence, still strongly supported French culture and institutions. He encouraged schooling in French as opposed to indigenous languages and supported training in European arts such as oil painting. Senghor explained that he identified as French himself and regarded the synthesis of foreign influences with Senegalese culture enriching (Counsel 2009: 155-57). Thus, Dakar in the 1960s and 1970s was filled with enthusiasm for a developing Senegalese national culture and maintaining French culture, language and dress as markers of modernity and learning. In Dakar today, people reminisce about these days as *la belle époque*, a time when living was inexpensive and people dressed and comported themselves "correctly."

Emerging from this historical moment of nationalist sentiment, Orchestra Baobab became known for its mix of Senegalese and Cuban musics, becoming one of the most popular bands in Dakar in the 1970s. It played for years in the Baobab nightclub, entertaining the upper classes, government VIPs, and the most distinguished diplomatic visitors to the city. Baobab broke

up in the 1980s, as local interest in Cuban music gave way to enthusiasm for the new genre *mbalax*<sup>1</sup> and its rising star, Youssou N'Dour. In 2001, after being invited by British world music producers to perform in London, the band reunited. Since then, Baobab has stayed together, releasing several new albums with the London-based world music record company World Circuit, and touring Europe and North America.

Baobab musicians see their mixing as evoking the ethos of the moment of Senegalese nation-building in the 1970s and as helping propel them onto world music stages. Their use of Senegalese traditional music is a marker of national pride and pre-modern ways of life, and their incorporation of Cuban music calls attention to the musicians' cosmopolitanism and makes their music more accessible to world music consumers. The band's use of "Western" instrumentation and Cuban music's connections to the Parisian dance scene in the early 20th century highlights the band's ties to France and a modernity the musicians still very much associate with French culture. Additionally, in emphasizing Cuban music's *Afro-Cuban* roots, musicians discuss the music as evoking the long history of the movement of African slaves across the Atlantic, the common roots of Senegalese and Cuban peoples and strategic political connections between Cuba and Senegal.

In combining Cuban and Senegalese musics on world music stages today, Baobab musicians engage with specific histories, politics and ideologies. Pointing to different and, at times, contradictory social meanings, these frictions are born out of the moves musicians make to represent their group and their nation as modern and traditional, cosmopolitan yet distinct, rooted in Senegalese traditions and symbolic of the routes African peoples have travelled, emblematic of essential connections between African peoples, and representative of Senegalese national culture. I will first discuss the band members' attitudes toward Senegalese music and then look at their views of Cuban music and musical mixing.

Baobab musicians often emphasize the Senegalese character of their music. They are proud of the fact that they do not merely play "copyright" (the Senegalese term for "covers," which were popular in Senegal in the 1950s and 1960s), but instead incorporate traditional Senegalese musical elements into Cuban music. Band member Balla Sidibé (vocals and percussion) recalled:

At our debut with Baobab, the Senegalese were surprised to see a Senegalese band singing salsa in Mandé.... They were surprised! Because before there was only Cuban salsa. People took the Cuban discs and rehearsed and played exactly like the disc. We took

everything away. We took up the sound of Baobab. (Interview, October 30, 2011)

The band uses mostly Cuban, rather than Senegalese, instruments, but it does have two traditional Senegalese griot vocalists: N’Diouga Dieng and Assane Mboup. Band members see their incorporation of griot vocals as marking the band and its sound as nationalist, innovative and uniquely Senegalese. As guitarist Yahya Fall put it, Baobab’s music is “salsa with the Senegalese touch.” He elaborated,

Making Afro-Cuban music and making an exact copy—it wasn’t glorified. We needed to bring a something of ourselves. A touch. This Senegalese spirit—it’s what we brought into it.... When you hear Orchestra Baobab or Number One,<sup>2</sup> you feel like it’s the salsa but there is something behind it that adds itself in the salsa.... The rhythms were Afro-Cuban but the melodies—we put in Senegalese melodies. “Pape N’Diaye”—that’s a Senegalese melody. (Interview, October 13, 2011)

Sidibé’s good friend and loyal Baobab fan, Mamadou Dieme believes that, “the strength of Baobab is the salsa and traditional music” (interview, October 27, 2011). Singer Rudy Gomis told me that Baobab’s music is “traditional music that [they] have salsized.” He continued:

It’s a mix of *pachanga*<sup>3</sup> where we follow the Cuban rhythm for a certain moment and in another moment we put in very slowly the Senegalese rhythm—with songs of the regions [of Senegal]. We use the languages from here.... It seems like we are playing music like the Cubans, but we’re not doing that.... We try to bring together what belongs to us and the salsa. (Interview, October 19, 2011)

In taking on griot singers to perform Senegalese melodies, Gomis told me, with a grin, that Baobab makes a kind of music that Cubans recognize but can’t quite figure out.

Although Baobab musicians are proud of the ways that traditional griot singing marks the band as distinctly Senegalese, they also see the griot tradition as marking the group as old-fashioned and pre-modern. Often when performing with Baobab in Dakar, griot singers Assane Mboup and N’Diouga Dieng approach audience members and sing about individuals’ families and

histories. In exchange, these audience members hand Mboup and Dieng money. Uncomfortable with this traditional practice, Gomis told me that he felt Mboup and Dieng should follow more Western norms of performance and should not be asking for money from clientele who have already paid to attend the show. For him, this is an older mode of patronage that should not be a part of Orchestra Baobab. As Papis Samba, a music researcher in Dakar, told me, “Baobab incarnates modernism. That is why griots aren’t the image of Baobab.... They [Baobab] were playing new sounds” (interview, October 18, 2011).

This ambivalence about traditional music in contemporary contexts can also be seen 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, October 13, 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, October 30, 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.

The qualities that came with Cuban music also make the band modern, cosmopolitan and accessible to an international audience, separating Baobab from traditional, less modern Senegalese music and practices. Senghor’s regard for French institutions and a belief in their innate modernity and worldliness in the 1970s was, and still is, quite important in Baobab artists’ musical development and in their discussions of their respect for Western music, instruments and education. However, musicians have transferred the modernity and worldliness with which French music, instruments and education were once associated onto Cuban music.

Baobab musicians and their Senegalese fans talked glowingly about Cubans as educated and able to read Western notation, and they discussed Cuban music as cultivated, structured, clear and rehearsed. Antoine Dos

Reis, a Cuban music aficionado in Dakar, considers Baobab “an international band.... They are of a high intellectual [level].... They can go wherever and they are comfortable” (interview, October 13, 2011). Richard Shain, in his work on the history of Cuban music in Senegal, writes that in 1970s Senegal, Cuban dance was “more than just movement. It was an embodiment of ‘correct’ social behaviors and sophistication” (Shain 2009: 201-202). By virtue of playing Cuban dance music Baobab assumed these qualities too, describing their musical production as “intellectual,” “well-poised,” “correct,” “prepared” and “arranged,” and their Western and Cuban instrumentation as “modern.” Emphasizing the composed nature of Baobab’s music, N’Diouga Dieng told me that “there’s no improvisation in Baobab.... When we prepare pieces, we prepare. For one week we work on it” (interview, October 26, 2011). Similarly, Yahya Fall observed 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 colour, this simplicity, this light music” (interview, October 13, 2011).

The sounds of Cuban music are not only markers of a modern, worldly sensibility; Baobab musicians also reclaim them as African. N’Diouga Dieng explained: “there’s lots of music born in Africa. There’s lots of rhythms that come from here [and the Cubans] worked on it in their own way.... They say ‘Afro-Cuban’ because it comes from here” (interview, October 26, 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 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). Louise Meintjes, in her work with black South African musicians, also finds that certain essentialist claims are an important way of affirming black identities. After questioning a musician about his correlation of blackness with musicality, Meintjes was admonished, “So now you want to take that away from us as well!” (2003: 122). In their comments concerning Cuban music’s origins, Baobab musicians simultaneously assert their belonging to a history of black Atlantic exchange and marginalization and 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, October 19, 2011). Balla Sidibé also thought that “those who sing salsa, they come from Africa” (interview, October 30, 2011).

Despite allusions to the history of the slave trade in making claims to Cuban music as their own, Baobab musicians do not make direct references to the slave trade in their discussions of Senegalese-Cuban connections. Instead, they talk about the more recent history of Cuban music in Senegal in the 1960s and 1970s, Senegal's political connections with Cuba and Baobab's development as a band that offered a new sound. Their discourse draws attention away from older tropes about Africa as pre-modern, a move consistent with musicians' disinterest in discussing the griot tradition in their group or in incorporating traditional Senegalese instruments into the band. In emphasizing more recent connections, musicians draw attention to a nostalgia for the post-independence *belle époque*, a nostalgia that, although shared with their European audiences, seems to evoke ideas of modernity, correctness and nationalist sentiments for musicians as well.

In building connections across the black Atlantic, Baobab musicians take part in a cosmopolitanism outside of whiteness, outside of colonialism. The cosmopolitanism that Baobab musicians engage in is one that 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*"<sup>4</sup> (interview, October 19, 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. (2002: 663)

White (2002) and 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).

In reaching out across the Atlantic, Baobab musicians also align themselves with Cubans through a “cosmopolitan memory” of a common history of slavery, colonization and independence (Beck and 2006: 12). In these ways, Baobab reflects Ulrich Beck’s and Natan Sznaider’s contention that the “‘cosmopolitanization’ of memory can potentially create new solidarities.... Through the media and other means of communication, people are drawn into cycles of cosmopolitan sympathies” (2006: 13). White also points out that Cuban music has anti-imperialist connotations to begin with, as “the history of U.S. intervention in Cuban affairs and the expanding U.S. culture industries led Cuban nationalists and radicals alike to see Afro-Cuban music as an antidote to American cultural imperialism” (2002: 668).

Although they develop this alternative cosmopolitanism in their discussions of Cuban music, Baobab musicians also use Cuban music to mark themselves as being at home in the world in many of the same ways that privileged Europeans do. They talk about their use of Cuban music as a way to mix things up a bit, in the same way many European and American musicians talk about engaging with African music. Just as the French visited 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, October 19, 2011)

Baobab musicians and their Senegalese fans see being open to the world in this way as central to the band’s international success. Antoine Dos Reis told me that you “need your music to leave home to be successful. [You] need foreigners to like you to be successful” (interview, October 13, 2011). Musicians believe that to be successful abroad they must be open to incorporating foreign musics; they must have “open ears.” Guitarist Latfi Benjeloune talked about his strong belief in this openness and its advantages for musicians:

We say that musicians should always have open ears. The principal function of a musician is to have a good ear, to hear all sorts of sounds and musics.... When we are musicians we want ... to understand what unites us all.... As musicians we need to know how to do it and have it. And we are thus open to everything. (Interview, October 25, 2011)

For Benjeloune, it is important that musicians have “open ears” so that they can appeal to more diverse audiences. Balla Sidibé also told me that it is advantageous for musicians to learn all kinds of music:

When you listen to lots of music, play everything, you can do anything. When you are limited, you are limited. It’s like if you could only make salsa and the next day we asked you to make steak. One day you’ll go somewhere and people will say, “We’re sick of eating this.” (Interview, October 30, 2011)

Benjeloune concluded: “there is a generation that is centred on Senegalese music only ... but I don’t think this is good; we need to be open. When we’re not open we die” (interview, October 25, 2011).

Drawing on Cuban music is also a strategic move because of the enduring popularity of Buena Vista Social Club, and Cuban music more generally, on the world music scene. Writing about Cuban music in the Belgian Congo, White (2002) suggests that Congolese musicians claimed Cuban music as their own in the mid-20th century because Cuban music had been so successful globally. Members of Baobab are aware of Cuban music’s international visibility and popularity, something that gives them even greater incentive to emphasize their Cuban musical influences both sonically and rhetorically. In engaging with the world music industry in the 21st century, musicians generally talk about their musical mixing as making the band’s sound more accessible and appealing to European and North American audiences. The band’s musical mixing across the black Atlantic also appeals to world music audiences’ desire to see transnational connections, and the band’s 1970s African-Cuban style appeals to audiences’ nostalgia for the 1960s and 1970s. In his writing on world music, Veit Erlmann argues that in expressing a certain nostalgia for the past through symbols of earlier times, audiences, industry personnel and musicians coat “the sounds of the fully commodified present with the patina of use value in some other time and place” (Erlmann 1996: 483). He writes that “nostalgia colonizes the past,” allowing the original meanings of history to be lost and new meanings to replace them (483). For European fans of

Baobab, the band evokes a nostalgia for a certain moment in history, albeit one purged of postcolonial political associations. Instead, Baobab evokes nostalgia for a moment when many older world music aficionados were just discovering African music, an era when Senegal was closer to France, both politically and culturally, and a time when many Senegalese saw French culture as correct and modern (something not always the case among today's Senegalese youth).

In sum, Baobab musicians make pragmatic, strategic and idealistic moves as they negotiate the frictions between Senegalese identities and international connections in developing their own identities and presenting themselves and their music to world music audiences (e.g., strategic and pragmatic in their emphasis of Cuban music to appeal to world music audiences; idealistic in their discussion of national pride and the connections they make between Senegalese and Cuban peoples). In associating with Cuba, they align themselves with the greater struggle of marginalized and colonized peoples around the black Atlantic while emphasizing their distinct Senegalese character. They point to their modernity and their openness to the world, while acknowledging the ways in which their music is steeped in tradition and history. In the end, these artists hope to represent themselves accurately and make their music attractive and accessible to European and North American audiences by calling on a familiar world music language that has been in global circulation since the 1920s.

## AfroCubism

AfroCubism was created in 2008 by world music producer Nick Gold specifically for the world music market. 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 the Caribbean. Already in Cuba with a recording space booked, Gold and American musician Ry Cooder developed the Buena Vista Social Club project instead. Twelve years later, Gold decided once more to put a transatlantic group together, inviting members of Eliades Ochoa's Grupo Patria and various Malian musicians to record together in a studio in Madrid. Often dubbed Buena Vista Take Two, AfroCubism released an album in 2010 and has been touring Europe, Canada and the U.S. since then.

AfroCubism differs from Orchestra Baobab in its history, composition and music. The band was created by the world music industry as a supergroup. It was developed as a novel collaboration packed with well-known musicians

who would hopefully be able to make good and commercially viable music together. Most of the musicians were not initially familiar with each other's music: the Cubans had very little exposure to West African music before joining AfroCubism and the Malian musicians are mostly too young to have been part of the generation that listened to and played Cuban music. The Cubans are mostly formally educated musicians who grew up playing older—what they describe as “traditional”—Cuban music in the eastern part of the country. As members of Eliades Ochoa's Grupo Patria they tour extensively throughout the world during the year. The Malians, on the other hand, are all griots hailing from large families of musicians who have been learning their instruments since childhood. All except electric guitarist Djelimady Tounkara play traditional Malian instruments. Thus, the musical mixing of Cuban and West African music in AfroCubism was primarily based, not on African musicians playing international music, but on traditional African and Cuban musicians coming together and working with each other.

Despite these differences, two of AfroCubism's musicians, Tounkara and singer Kassé Mady Diabaté, came of age in Mali in the 1960s/1970s era of Cuban music and national independence. In conversations, they remembered this history fondly and often. Currently, Tounkara plays with the Rail Band, a group from the 1970s known for its fusion of Cuban and Malian musics, and Kassé Mady sings with Toumani Diabaté's Symmetric Orchestra and is a well-known traditional singer in Bamako, performing for weddings and baptisms on a regular basis. The other Malian musicians in the group are somewhat familiar with Cuban music, as they heard it growing up, but they have focused on more traditional Malian idioms in their professional careers. To them, Cuban music is “old” music.

Like the members of Baobab, Tounkara and Diabaté played and sang Cuban music in the 1960s and 1970s in Bamako in the Rail Band and Las Maravillas de Mali (later renamed Badema National), respectively. As in Senegal, Cuban music was also quite popular in Mali at the time. In 1964, four years after Malian independence, the Malian government sent ten students to Cuba to receive conservatory training “to establish a professional corps of musical educators for Mali's cultural institutions” (Skinner 2009: 83). As Ryan Skinner explains, not only was this move part of an ongoing political relationship between Cuba and Mali, but it also fulfilled the Malian government's desire to “modernize” the country and its cultural production through institutionalized study—a marker of modernity taken from French values in this context and reflecting an attitude similar to the one in Senegal at the time. In formally studying Cuban music, the Malian musicians could achieve a marker of French modernity (the formal study of music), a modernity valued in Mali, without

attending French institutions or studying French music. Despite the desire to promote a certain French modernity through the study of Cuban music, as in Senegal, the Malian government also pushed to Africanize Malian cultural production to promote national solidarity. Thus, bands that played Cuban music, like *Las Maravillas de Mali*,<sup>5</sup> were encouraged to bring African themes into their songs. Skinner writes that former Malian president Mahamane Touré, a politician “whose policies included strong support for the preservation and valorization of indigenous traditions” (2009: 119) encouraged *Las Maravillas* to make more room for Kassé Mady Diabaté’s traditional vocals. In 1975 he declared the band’s name “un-African,” recommending something more “African” (Skinner 2009: 119). Thus, the band changed its name to *Badema National* to reflect the group’s specifically Malian origins.<sup>6</sup> These orchestras were regarded as “modern” by virtue of their instrumentation and as “African” by virtue of the content of their songs and use of traditional singers. They were popular in the decades immediately following independence, but, just as in Senegal, their popularity in Mali waned as other popular musics competed for attention.

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 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 Chao<sup>7</sup> behind it, because there was a European or American star in it.” (Interview, February 25, 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, February 25, 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.

Unlike many world music collaborations, AfroCubism involves a two-sided interaction across the black Atlantic that gives all of the musicians

a voice in musical production. Still, musicians negotiate difference and inequality. As Debra Klein writes, “groups coming together across difference probably do not engage in relations of equality. Nonetheless ... each group may get just what it wants from the interaction. This is strategic collaboration: equal relations are not the goal” (Klein 2007: xxvi). AfroCubism integrates musicians from different parts of the world who have grown up in different historical moments. Having achieved varying degrees of success in the world music scene with other bands, these artists also have assorted career goals and musical interests. Lacking as long a history as Orchestra Baobab, AfroCubism musicians are simultaneously pragmatic and strategic about making the collaboration a success and positioning themselves in the project to build their own careers. They are also idealistic about making good music and connecting with other musicians across the black Atlantic. In considering their collaboration, musicians’ pragmatism, strategic thinking and idealism mix with the histories of Mali and Cuba in the 1960s and 1970s, the history of the slave trade and the legacy of the Buena Vista Social Club.

AfroCubism’s musicians are both enthusiastic about and frustrated by the collaboration. They are grateful for the work and are always looking for work that is more fulfilling musically. They are excited about the new music that they are learning and disappointed by the compromises they have to make. The band members promote this collaboration as a natural product of black Atlantic connections, as representative of the unique traditions that they brought to the group, and as marking them as worldly, flexible and adaptable musicians, ready for the next professional opportunity. A factor complicating discussions about AfroCubism’s collaboration was the musicians’ understanding that the band would likely be short-lived. Collaborations of this scale are difficult to sustain for extended periods of time. There are several reasons for this, but the biggest are the difficult logistics involved in bringing Cubans and Malians together and musicians’ commitments to other bands and tours. As a result, AfroCubism musicians always seemed to have in mind the quick success of the group and their own professional futures when it came to discussing their musical work together.

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 them new audiences by drawing on each others’ fan bases. The Malians could attract the multitudes of Buena Vista Social Club fans, and the Cubans could draw from large numbers of followers of West African musics.

AfroCubism musicians often naturalized the musical mixing they were engaging in by emphasizing connections between Cubans and Malians. 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, February 25, 2012). Cuban guitarist Osnel Odit Bavastro believed that the African musical elements in Cuban music came both directly from African slaves, and from the North African musical element in Spanish music, which was later brought to Cuba. He explained:

There are two Africas in the Cuban music: that which was a product of the Moors in Spain and that which was a product of the slaves that arrived in Cuba directly from Africa. They brought their culture, their rhythm, their music.... AfroCubism is like a return of Cuban music to Africa. (Interview, July 24, 2011)

Musicians also naturalize this collaboration by pointing out similarities between the two musics. Malian balaphonist Lassana Diabaté explains, “Cuban music is close to Malian music. There are the melodies that are there. You see [the Cuban song] ‘A la Luna’—you could play this like [our Malian song] ‘Jarabi’” (interview, July 25, 2011). Lassana continued to explain how he developed a close affinity to 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, July 25, 2011).

Despite linking Cuban and Malian traditions through an often vaguely alluded to history of the slave trade, musicians were not interested in this story when I inquired about it. Scrunching his nose when I asked if he had thought about the historical connections, singer and maracas player Eglis Ochoa told me that the slave trade is important because a lot of rhythms came from Africa, but he didn’t think it was too important for this group. When asked a similar question, Lassana stated, “I prefer not thinking about the history of slavery.... I prefer to be in the present” (interview, July 25, 2011). Toumani also told me that he doesn’t like discussions about slavery. For him, the slave era is over and much too far in the past to have relevance for AfroCubism. This is why, in concerts, he talks about the cultural exchange that took place between Cuba and Mali in the 1960s and 1970s and not the history of the slave trade. It is quite possible that these musicians are actively and strategically pushing against portrayals of Africa as old and pre-modern, a trope found in much of the publicity and press concerning the group generated by the record company, concert promoters and journalists. In addition, it may be that discussing slavery is simply unpleasant and not particularly relevant for the musicians and their music-making today.

In working with each other, band members often point to differences in their musics, their approaches to playing and 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 [Malians] 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, February 25, 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, July 25, 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, February 25, 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 new gigs. 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, July 27, 2011). While tapping out rhythms on the tour bus one day, 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. Malian 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 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, July 24, 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 of which they are in charge, and 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. 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. José Angel Martínez 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, July 27, 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. I often heard, and band members confirmed it, that during a Malian solo, the Cubans would cut off the soloist and move to the next section of the song. Bavastro explained that the Malians focus on improvisation and rhythm while the Cuban musicians sustain the Malians' improvisations, providing harmonies. 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, February 25, 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, July 24, 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 comportment. We don't live with the same realities" (interview, February 25, 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, February 25, 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, July 24, 2011). Coming to a mutual respect was not instantaneous. However, despite initial problems in organizing the way the group would work together, the group did function effectively with few conflicts. There would at times be disagreements about sound levels, mikes and solos, but, 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, July 24, 2011)

Band members are driven by idealistic desires to connect with other cultures and musics, especially across the black Atlantic, and to feel cosmopolitan, open to the world. They are also strategic and pragmatic as they represent the group as a natural product of historical black Atlantic connections and a modern product of cosmopolitan openness, and as they find ways to work productively together for their mutual success in the world music industry.

## Conclusion

Debra Klein writes: “Strategic collaboration is ... the art of occupying and performing one’s status position so as to facilitate a common project” (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 simultaneously make strategic and ideological connections to each other, to the black Atlantic, and to the postcolonial politics and histories of other African and Afro-diasporic peoples, and they sometimes pragmatically let go of certain positions to work together effectively. Sometimes a strategic move is also an idealistic stance (e.g., constructing connections across the black Atlantic or taking up Cuban music as a marker of modernity), and periodically a pragmatic decision contradicts an idealistic stance (e.g., changing their music to work effectively with each other) as musicians continually layer these positions, their intentions and their meanings. They simultaneously work beautifully together and rub up against one another, revealing complex identities and multifaceted perspectives on the black Atlantic, African and Afro-diasporic peoples and the world music industry. In confronting different traditions and cultures, musicians are forced to carefully consider their artistic and philosophical positions on the music they are making and how and why they hope to combine it with other musics. Friction has produced thought and consideration.

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. 🌿

## Notes

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All quotations from Senegalese and Malian artists are translated from their original French, and all quotations from Cuban artists are translated from their original Spanish by the author.

1. *Mbalax* is a popular Senegalese music and dance genre characterized by its fusion of traditional Senegalese *sabar* drumming, Latin music and Western popular musics such as jazz and soul.

2. The Orchestre Number One de Dakar was Orchestra Baobab's main musical rival in the 1970s. They even had an actual competition in the main soccer stadium in Dakar, and Orchestra Baobab won. People in Dakar were split, however, over which group was better. Many said that Number One was more well liked generally and the Baobab had more of the ears of society's elite.

3. *Pachanga* is a Cuban music genre with roots in *son montuno*, the genre out of which salsa also developed.

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

5. This band was founded by the ten Malian students who were sent to study in Cuba in 1964.

6. *Badema* refers to familial intimacy and social solidarity in Mandé society (Skinner 2009: 119).

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

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