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LEARNING TO DANCE IN RURAL MALI

This paper concerns the practice of vernacular dance performance in a peasant village in rural southern Mali. Based on participant observation, focused interviews, and audio-visual documentation, we report on how children and youths typically acquire the skills to dance in this village. We find that, strikingly, the development of these skills appears to take place largely during the performance practice itself. By contrast, teaching does not play a role. This observation has implications for the concept of transmission, typically understood as the handing-down of specific bits of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. Such a model of transmission may appear plausible with respect to institutions of modern pedagogy such as schooling or museums. By contrast, practice-theoretical conceptualizations of situated learning emphasize the relationship between the learning process and its social environment, assuming that learners' development of cultural skills is embedded in its practical implementation. Prominent such theories have emerged from the intersection of anthropology and developmental psychology, and their relevance has been shown in the anthropology of childhood. The ethnographic research presented in this paper suggests that these theories are consistent with how people learn to participate in vernacular dance performance in southern Mali.

Keywords: Mali; learning; teaching; guided participation; legitimate peripheral participation.

Research context

This paper is about how people learn to dance in Sagele, a peasant village located about 75 km southwest of Bamako towards the border with neighboring Guinea, whose inhabitants identify with the ethno-linguistic group of Maninka (French: Malinké).¹ Maninka peasants in southern Mali as well as in neighbouring Guinea frequently organize multimodal performances which integrate percussion music with song and dance. In Sagele, percussion music is often performed by specialized male djembe and dundun drummers, but also can be played by semi-specialized female performers on calabash drums, or simply consist of the performance of hand-clapping rhythms alone. These events mostly take place on the occasion of wedding celebrations and the peasants conceive of them as a kind of public entertainment (*nyènajè*) or play/game (*tulon*). The spatial setting is an embodied amphi-theater consisting of a ring of spectators and musicians who literally frame the situation and create a clear space to its interior, a performance arena that serves as a dance floor. Each piece begins with an empty arena, which then fills with a section of the participants that trades the ring of musicians and spectators for the dance floor to perform a slow and simple walking dance, moving concentrically in a single file. After a few minutes, the file dissolves, and the participants return to the ring. Now the percussion gets louder and faster, which marks the transition to the second part of the piece. Individual dancers, ideally in groups of only two at a time, leave the ring and seek out the arena to dance vigorously for about 10–20 seconds. They then return to the ring of audience members and clear the way for others to take their turn on the dance-floor. Each piece continues until no more people come to dance in the arena. This two-part form of group dancing and individual dancing is repeated, piece by piece.

There exists a broad repertoire of specific pieces in Sagele, of which about a dozen are performed very frequently.² Each piece is a composite multimodal construct insofar as it includes specific songs, dance-moves and percussion rhythms. While song (*dònkili*), dance (*dòn*) and dance music (*fòli*) are explicitly addressed as distinct modalities of expressive action, they together are conceived of as a coherent unified genre. For instance, people distinguish djembe-music (*jenbefòli*) from djembe-dance (*jenbedòn*), but when speaking of "djembe-play" (*jenbetulon*), they clearly mean neither of the distinct modalities but the multimodally integrated music-dance genre of djembe performance.³

Importantly, access to dance performance in the celebration context is not limited to dance specialists. Everyone present at the gathering is invited and even socially obliged to participate from time to time, at least in the walking dance. This temporary taking on of the lead performance role, the dancing, by the community members is coordinated by regulations and on-the-spot negotiations of turn-taking – "dancefloor-taking," so-to-say. Arguably, the participatory ethos of this event type does not at all detract from the fact that presentational aspects are also fundamental in this context. The thrill of presenting yourself through dance in view of the public, being aware of being audienced by the gathered community, contributes a lot to the pleasure and fun which the Sagele peasants report to associate with participating in such dance celebrations. Participatory and presentational aspects of performance in this context coexist and mutually reinforce each other, suggesting that the prevalent theorization of the participatory and the presentational as opposite, polar concepts [Nahachewsky 1995; Turino 2008] does not apply here [Polak 2021].⁴

The research we present in this paper is based on both authors' joint fieldwork in Sagele in the years 2018, 2019 and 2010. First author Rainer Polak has engaged in long-term ethnographic fieldwork on dance music and celebration culture in southern Mali since the 1990s [see Polak 2004; 2007]. In recent years, he has expanded the research focus to also include the dancing itself. Second author Noumouké Doumbia, a resident of Bamako with an MA degree in educational sciences, has collaborated on all aspects of Polak's fieldwork in Mali since 2016. Our joint fieldwork on social dance events in Sagele applied the classical ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviews, and audio-visual documentation, but also included thick immersion in everyday life, social relationships and, if only sporadically, public dance performance – which the locals always warmly welcomed, however novice our attempts may have seemed to them.

Learning by observation and pitching in: Insights from interviews

Interestingly, no active dance teaching seems to take place in Sagele, according to our ethnographic experience. By teaching, we mean situations or activities intentionally dedicated mainly to the transmission and/or monitoring of acquisition of knowledge through instruction, tutoring, or demonstration.⁵ Our observation of dance teaching being absent in Sagele was unanimously confirmed, and often elaborated further, in conversations and interviews we had with some of the most experienced dancers in the village.⁶ For example, Adama Keita, a senior male peasant from a neighboring village once told us the following:

No one taught me how to dance. I just have to observe how you move, the rest is up to me, it's up to my mind. If I just watched you dance, that's all. A dancer first sees someone's movement, then he/she has a picture of the dance in his/her mind, and then he/she is able to perform it, in practice. There is no teaching, no rehearsal. All you need is to be attentive, and then you put it into practice yourself. [A. Keita 2019]

Similarly, when we asked Fatoumata Kante, a senior female peasant from Sagele, how she would go about if she wanted to acquire a certain dance step, she replied:

You have to take a position from which you can observe the performer's dance step. Then you move along with whatever the dancer is doing, you do the same thing, and when you feel good, you go out on the dance floor and try it yourself. [Kante 2020]

When we insistently asked Fatoumata whether indeed the instruction of children would not play any role, she interrupted us impatiently:

No, it's about you imitating others. If you want to dance, you train yourself. There is no teaching of children by adults. The children themselves observe it and those who like it will then do it. [Kante 2020]

Sitan Keita, who serves as president of a village association that helps its members organize their family members' wedding celebrations and other life cycle rituals, confirmed the latter point, as she told us:

One of my daughters is a skilled dancer. She is a great dancer, but I never taught her how to dance. She acquired the dancing skills on her own. I did not teach her how to dance. She played clapping and dancing games with other children and watched the dancers' movements at celebrations. Since she was a small child, from about the age of five. What sparked her interest in dancing was her own inner motivation, her personal love for dance. [S. Keita 2019]

When I (Rainer Polak) asked senior female peasant Minata Keita what would be the best way for me (a foreign visitor) to learn to dance in Sagele, her answer was very much consistent with the above statements: "You watch the dancers' movements. You look at the dance steps, and then you can imitate them little by little" [M. Keita 2019]. In summary, villagers emphasize that learning to dance depends on one's own motivation and strongly relies on observing performances and then pitching in to the same performances by imitating the contributions of other dancers.

Embedded learning: Insights from observing performance practice

In this section, we describe some aspects of how the process of learning to dance through observation and imitation is embedded within the actual performance context. At public celebrations, children and youth usually fill the ranks in the spectator ring (see Figure 1). While standing at the sidelines of the performance arena, they tend to persistently and attentively follow the events in the arena (see Figure 2). Sometimes they clap or move along with the main beat and sometimes they try out some dance steps themselves (see Videos 1 and 2).

Beyond observing, imitating and exploring dance performance at the sidelines, children and youth frequently get so excited as to take some few steps into the ring and try their dance moves there. Mostly, this does not amount to really taking the dance-floor but rather blurs and pushes the border of the performance-arena inwards. From time to time, this will provoke counter-action, which is to clear the floor by pushing the children back (see Video 3). Thus, the exact location of the human sideline which marks off the performance arena is permanently re-negotiated.



Figure 1. Children (marked by white rectangle frames) make up a good portion of the attendees of a djembe performance in Sagele (Feb 2020). The six drummers seen from behind are (from left to right) Moriba Traore, Adama Keita, Seydou Keita, Namakan Keita, Kanda Keita, and Madou Diakit . The dancer center-ground is Minata Keita



Figure 2. Children attentively observe djembe dance performances in Sagele (Jan–Feb 2019)

Finally, older children and youths sometimes enter the actual arena and perform. In the group dancing, it is always an adult who leads the line, typically followed by his or her relatives, friends, or supporters. The young can join only at the tail or some other less prominent section of the line (see Video 4). As for the individual dancing, children or youths sometimes perform a few steps into the arena, but then stop, laugh, turn-around, and go back to the ring. Sometimes, however, they go on and perform center-ground (see Figure 3 and Video 5). However, such opportunities for children and youths to take the floor are constrained and relatively rare, as the principle of seniority counts a lot in this peasant society, where the old are privileged over the young in many diverse respects, including access to the dance performance in public events. The young therefore must be quite motivated, persistent and patient while making their way from spectator



Figure 3. Fatoumata Kante's 8 years-old daughter Mami takes a turn (Feb 2019). (Upper left image) Mami observes the dancing from the ring. (Upper right image) She enters the arena and (Lower left image) performs in a dyad with another, adult dancer, where both share the same dance-move; this is appreciated as good behaviour and aesthetically pleasing, according to local standards. (Lower right image) Finally, little Mami receives the drummers' and the public's full focus for a couple of seconds

to performer over the years. And many of them indeed *are* motivated, persistent and patient. As is the case for learning to dance in general, the opportunities for actual trials in the arena, too, are embedded in but also constrained by the performance context. For instance, opportunities for the young are more likely at smaller, less representative events where adult participation is not very powerful, near the beginning or end of an event, when the celebration is not yet or no longer at full swing, and near the end within pieces, when adults already had their shares.

Discussion

Informal and implicit "learning by doing" is extremely wide-spread across cultures, whereas explicit tuition and correction are quite rare, as anthropologist of childhood David Lancy has argued on the basis of broad surveys of ethnographic literature [Lancy 2008; 2010; 2016]. This concerns even specialized activities, such as the artistic practices – song, epics, instrumental music, dance – handed down within *jeli* (griot) families in southern Mali and elsewhere in West Africa [Durán and Penn 2018]. Working at the intersection of cultural anthropology and developmental psychology, Barbara Rogoff has theoretically elaborated the popular concept of learning by doing and introduced the more nuanced concepts of "guided participation" and "learning by observing and pitching in" [Rogoff 1990; 1994; 2014]. According to Rogoff, children learners show an intrinsic motivation to collaborate and contribute, are capable of sustained attentive observation, and are inclined to imitate and participate in their elders' core occupations, if only they have the chance to be present and observe. The prototypical

role of adults in this context is not to teach; rather, it is to provide opportunities for the children to be physically present and socially participate, in increasingly reliable and serious ways. For example, anthropologist Barbara Polak has shown this to be the case with little peasants' development of farming skills in southern Mali [Polak 2012]. Under the label of "legitimate peripheral participation", anthropologist Jean Lave and educational scientist Étienne Wenger have elaborated a theoretical concept similar to Rogoff's, emphasizing that in many cultural contexts of situated learning, newcomers usually work their way from more peripheral to more central roles of action, but are accepted from the outset as legitimate participants [Lave and Wenger 1991]. The ethnographic evidence we presented in this paper is strikingly consistent with both Rogoff's and Lave and Wenger's theories. In the case of learning to dance in Sagele, both the situational pitching-in and its developmental trajectory from peripheral to central action roles is manifest even in a literal, physical sense: namely, from the ring of audience members to the performance arena, which is the dance-floor.

Theories of learning are sometimes contrasted along the dimension of agency. The concepts of teaching and transmission tend to assume agency to lie mainly in the hands of the older generation; by contrast, the concept of skill acquisition may seem to emphasize the agency and autonomy of the young. However, according to the theories of situated learning we referenced above, social learning is not so much about *either* the young *or* the old governing the processes of cultural continuity and change. Rather, these theories understand processes of learning as the increasingly full-fledged participation in social practices, where the goal of the learning process is not so much the accumulation of knowledge *per se*, but to become a reliable and recognized interaction partner, and thus a member of the community of practice within which one grows up. These theories thus predict that the social practices in question often will tend to be structured so as to accommodate the perspectives of both experienced old-timers and new-coming learners. In our view, our ethnography of celebration music and dance performance in Sagele being structured so as to afford the little villagers' learning to dance is a good example in case. In this context, the conventional understanding of cultural transmission as the intentional handing-down of given bits of cultural content from one generation to the next via channels of transmission dedicated to demonstration and teaching evidently is not relevant. Such a "genealogical" model of transmission may appear plausible in contexts of modern formalized pedagogy such as schooling or museums. However, as anthropologist Tim Ingold has argued, the assumption that cultural knowledge can exist and be transmitted separately from its practical implementation and emergent re-construction in each generation is questionable [Ingold 2001]. However, it would be equally implausible to assume strong degrees of autonomy for the young learners, as research in the anthropology of childhood has demonstrated [Polak 2012; Lancy 2012]. Rather, learning is dependent on the adults practicing the activities within which the learning is embedded and designing these practices so as to be open for the young to grow into them. Motivation and agency is clearly required from both the old and the young in processes of maintaining social practices and practice-embedded learning, such as learning to dance in rural southern Mali.

Endnotes

1. We carried out the research underlying the paper in close collaboration. First author Rainer Polak has engaged in long-term ethnographic fieldwork on djembe drum ensemble music performance for dance in the context of celebration culture in southern Mali since the 1990s [see Polak 2004; 2007]. In recent years, he has expanded the research focus to also include the dancing itself – djembe dancing (jenbedòn), as the genre is addressed in the local language. Since 2016, second author Noumouké Doumbia, a resident of Bamako with an MA degree

in educational sciences, has collaborated on all aspects of Polak's fieldwork in Mali, including participant observation, interviews, and audio-visual documentation of dance events in Sagele.

2. The names of the most frequently performed pieces include Madan, Bòlòn, Kisa, Wurukutu (Ouroukoutou), Manjanin (Mendiani), Sansènè, and Furasi (also called Suku or Soli in other regions of southern Mali and neighbouring Guinea).
3. For recent advances in the choreomusicological theorizing of music-dance genres see Damsholt 2018; Stepputat and Seye 2020; Haugen 2021.
4. This was the main argument in first author Rainer Polak's contribution to the 30th Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology [see Polak 2021].
5. See Lancy [2016] for a similar minded, yet more elaborate definition of teaching. There also exist much broader definitions, which, for instance, assume the social tolerance for a child's playful participation in a household task to already represent an instance of teaching. For a critique of such all-embracing and thus analytically unproductive definitions, see Lancy [2015].
6. The interviews were held in Maninka and transcribed and translated by the authors in collaboration.

Video samples

Video 1.

Polak, Rainer; Doumbia, Noumouké (videographers)

2019 Some children at the left side of the spectators' circle, standing below two calabash rattle players, explore clapping or grooving along with the main pulse of the music and dance rhythm. (Digital video field recording.). Frankfurt a.M.: Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, data repository of Rainer Polak's project "2017-0137- Fieldwork in Mali". Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/Polak-Doumbia-1>

Video 2.

Polak, Rainer; Doumbia, Noumouké (videographers)

A girl standing at the sideline opposite the drummers tries to get into some specific dance-step, while at the same time carrying an infant on her back. Frankfurt a.M.: Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, data repository of Rainer Polak's project "2017-0137- Fieldwork in Mali". (Digital video field recording.). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/Polak-Doumbia-2>

Video 3.

Polak, Rainer; Doumbia, Noumouké (videographers)

In the right half of the image, the focused performance interaction is taking place, which is the encounter between drummers and individual solo dancers. To the left, several participants ever again briefly leave the spectators' circle. Of these, two adults seek and finally get to take the floor, one after the other, whereas some children are only alluding to or playing as if they were taking the floor. Ultimately, the children are pushed back by an adult (a member of the drum ensemble) who chases them by (again playfully) alluding to whipping their feet. At the same time, other persons cross the dance-floor in other action-roles, such as serving drinking water to some senior attendees of the celebration. Frankfurt a.M.: Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, data repository of Rainer Polak's project "2017-0137- Fieldwork in Mali". Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/Polak-Doumbia-3>

Video 4.

Polak, Rainer; Doumbia, Noumouké (videographers)

A young girl correctly and beautifully performs a walking step in a single-file circling dance performed only by adults besides her. Frankfurt a.M.: Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, data repository of Rainer Polak's project "2017-0137- Fieldwork in Mali". Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/Polak-Doumbia-4>

Video 5.

Polak, Rainer; Doumbia, Noumouké (videographers)

An eight-year old girl, who is the youngest daughter of interview partner Fatoumata Keita, takes the floor for a proper little solo dance, starting from the left side. Towards the end of her performance, she even attracts the attention of the lead drummer, who uses his drum patterns to shift the focus from another dancer to the little one, giving her a final cadence (a signal break) after she has left the dance-floor. Frankfurt a.M.: Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, data repository of Rainer Polak's project "2017-0137- Fieldwork in Mali". Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/Polak-Doumbia-5>

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