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Commentary

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[1.1] Eshantha Peiris's study of the "embedded music theory" in *gäṭa beraya* drumming is a rigorous and detailed piece of scholarship. The author asserts that "different modes of theorizing" enable linguistic forms to be performed musically, involving a three-tier process of transforming uttered poetry into representative vocables and then drum strokes. Through explaining the mechanics and processes that drummers employ as they represent linguistic utterances through drumming, the main thrust of Peiris's article is the assertion that drummers must theorize to create the "sonic patterning" (3.1) they produce. To this end, he asks such questions as "How do *gäṭa beraya* drummers translate recited *bera pada* [drum vocable phrases] into strokes on the drum?" and "how might *gäṭa beraya* drummers be actively theorizing while performing?" (4.5)

[1.2] I respond to Peiris's article as an ethnomusicologist who has done related research among Yoruba musicians of southwest Nigeria and musicians in a historically connected musical and religious tradition in Cuba. As someone who has researched the surrogate speech and vocable systems of Nigerian *bàtá* and Cuban *batá* drums, as well as how sacred Yoruba texts are set to song, I comment on Peiris's research as an analytical insider. I am, however, an outsider to South Asian music.

[1.3] Despite the remoteness between the musical cultures at the core of Peiris's research and mine, I can identify many areas of overlap between the *gäṭa beraya* and *bàtá* vocable systems. Some of these commonalities are contextual and reflect a generic human psychological and emotional desire to communicate to the divine with instrumental music. Humans' propensity to encode emotional messages with patterned sound, our tendency to associate spiritual entities with discrete qualities of sound, and our practices of praising people and deities with musical offerings are common to many cultures.

[1.4] In this response, however, I am most engaged with the technical correlations I recognize between Sinhala, Yoruba, and Cuban drumming, many of which are indicative of wider correlations between drum vocable systems of the world. All three traditions use drums with a double-headed construction and a horizontal playing position, which largely determine their sonic possibilities and technical limitations, and which makes them particularly suited to comparison.

Theory or knowledge?

[2.1] It is not until para. 4.6 that Peiris offers his working definition of what constitutes a theory: "a conception or mental scheme of something to be done, or of the method of doing it; a systematic statement of

rules or principles to be followed" (OED online, s.v. theory). If I use the Oxford English Dictionary definition to determine whether or not Yoruba *bàtá* drummers (*alúbàtá*) are theorizing when they encode ordinary speech onto their drums, I am inclined towards the negative. I have not learned enough about *gäṭa beraya* drumming from reading Peiris's article to ascertain whether the drummers must (or even do) theorize in order to realize uttered texts as drummed music. Nor am I certain that a high-level pianist needs to theorize to perform or even learn a Chopin nocturne. As a classically-trained piano player, I suspect that theorizing, as defined here, helps one memorize the piece but may not be necessary to learn it and play it well.

[2.2] In considering the differences between theorizing and knowing, my mind harks back to 1996, at which time I was having one of my early supervision meetings with linguist and ethnomusicologist David Hughes. When I discussed my first efforts to understand the comparative drum language grammars of the Nigerian *bàtá* and Cuban *batá*, David alerted me that just as we can speak a language without understanding much detail about its rules, many musicians can play to a high level without fully understanding the musical grammar of their musical system. I cannot remember the finer details of our conversation, but it went something like this:

> "What are the rules of i and e in the English language?" I responded with the only rule I knew through rote learning.
>
> "I before e except after c."
>
> "What about science and weight, and what about the different pronunciations of ei in seize and leisure, and the pronunciations of ie in die, chief, and pier?"

David's point: just as I am proficient in speaking and writing in my mother tongue without being able to explain many of its rules, exceptions, and the full range of possible pronunciations available, many musicians do not fully understand the grammar of the musical systems they have mastered. Similarly, just as few of us are aware of what phonologists know about the complex processes inside of our mouths as we speak, musicians can only communicate a little about the full complexity of high-level musical performance. As I endeavoured to understand how Yoruba drummers transform natural speech into drum language, I discovered that the way the drummers explained the rules to me was incomplete, as they generally do not think about what they are doing as they do it (as in ordinary speech) or, indeed, reflect on it at other times.

[2.3] It is inarguable that musicians engaged with performance structured by drum language need extensive knowledge of such things as (1) the texts that provide the source material for their drumming; (2) how uttered sounds can be meaningfully articulated; (3) the technicalities of how to produce a wide vocabulary of drummed sounds; and (4) an internalized understanding of how the different kinds of drums in the ensemble relate to the source text and each other. As I tried to understand the grammar of the *bàtá*'s drum language, I discovered that *alúbàtá* have trouble communicating the complicated processes involved with transferring natural and chanted speech into a complex machine language that can be back-translated into Yoruba by listeners. The efforts of Nigerian drummers to convey their system resulted in highly simplified explanations at best, and at worst, the information made little sense. As I reported in my first monograph (2010, 38), my *bàtá* teacher Rabiu Ayandokun once responded to my incessant questioning with, "Don't ask me what I do. I don't know what I do." Similarly, David Hughes, a Japanese specialist, reported that the Japanese musicians from whom he collected his data were surprised when he explained the patterns and acoustic properties of their complex mnemonic system. He wrote, "consciousness is not necessary for the operation of these systems" (2000, 110).

[2.4] From the perspective of my research experience, I wonder how Peiris collected the data that informed his findings about the vocable system he presents. His detailed exposition about the musical system left little space to elucidate how practitioners talk about the linguistic and musical systems they have mastered. Learning about the performers' discourse would reveal more about how, how much, or even if they theorize their music both during and outside of performances.

[2.5] Lest I start to sound like a conservative musicologist who believes in a hierarchy of the world's musical systems which places global minority art music at the intellectual and artistic pinnacle, the question about whether musicians theorize while playing is not culture-specific. In Western art music, performance and musical analysis are discrete specializations (although with significant overlap). Likewise, these specializations are evident in Cuban and Yoruba drumming, where I am more of a theorist than a performer. To ascertain

how much actual theorizing is going on when Sinhala drummers perform, I would need to know much more about how they learn, which is beyond the scope of Peiris's article. Education systems (whether "formal" or "informal") reveal what is important in the musical system, what is learned by rote, and what is intellectualized and theorized by the musician.

[2.6] Professional Yoruba drummers are born into an inherited craft lineage for drumming, where they carry the name of the defied progenitor of drumming, Àyàn. Similarly, Peiris's primary research partner, Muddanave Sunil, was born into a caste-based lineage of male ritual dancers and drummers. In this article, Peiris does not tell us how Sunil learned, but this may be central to discussions about theorizing. Lineage-based learning generally starts very young and is often informal or learned *in situ* rather than formally taught and does not involve notation. The Yoruba drummers with whom I have worked cannot remember learning, but recall playing professionally alongside their fathers as children. If drummers do not know how they know what they know, how do they theorize? If our shared aural perception, our propensity to learn language and music through mimesis, and our innate tendency to orally represent non-human sounds by using onomatopoeia are taken as axiomatic, how much actual theorizing is going on when drummers communicate drum timbres and rhythms with vocables? If drummers are learning by rote how to play texts using prescribed vocables, some of which may have already been systematically transformed from source texts, does this require theorizing? What aspects of perceiving language and communicating with the drum are drawing from humans' instinctive learning strategy to copy and mirror?

Vocables in cross-cultural perspective

[3.1] Although the musical system that Peiris describes is new to me, many aspects of his research about Sinhala vocables are familiar. As Hughes (1989, 2000) has explained, all systems of musical surrogate speech and vocables are reliant on our biologically determined linguistic equipment in the mouth, nasal passage, throat, and chest. This, alongside our shared propensity for mimesis and phonetic symbolism, such as onomatopoeia, might be thought of collectively as the "hardware" of vocable systems. The components that can be thought of as "software" here are the culture-specific components that make each vocable system unique. Primary among these is language, as musicians can only draw from the structures and oral sounds they know how to make. How the host language of a vocable system functions will largely determine what aspects of the language are prioritized for representation. Yoruba is a true tone language, so the relative pitch of the vocables must maintain that of ordinary speech to maintain the intelligibility of the vocables and drum timbres. In para. 1.5 (end note 11) we learn that Sinhala, by contrast, is a mora-timed language. Apart from explaining the importance of the relative length of syllables, there is little explanation of how the language works and which aspects the drummers prioritise for representation.

[3.2] From studying the data available to me in Peiris's examples, I have identified numerous vocables with features that Hughes found to be cross-culturally common in acoustic-iconic systems. For example, syllables that start with "stop consonants" [p, t, k, b, d, g] denote a sharp attackand when voiced at the end of the syllable, they denote damped strokes, whereas syllables that end with nasals or vowels denote undamped (sustained) sounds. Accordingly, the vocables for undamped strokes in Example 6 end with [u] and [m, m̩]. Peiris explains, "the two damped strokes (*tat* and *dit*) end with oral stops (i.e., consonants that stop all airflow), the names of the undamped/resonant strokes (*ton* and *nam*) end with nasals" (5.1). Of relevance, in Yoruba drumming, I found that the syllabic nasal *ń* is usually given a longer note value than its neighbors, and similarly, the Sinhala vocables that end with a nasal consonant frequently correspond to longer durations. To raise another example, [r] (which appears in the last bar of Example 6) receives only a passing mention as being "played as a quick double stroke." Looking at its occurrence in Examples 6 and 12, it behaves similarly to those found in various West African vocable systems where the syllable is preceded or followed by double or triple strokes to mimic a tongue flap. Regarding Peiris's explanation of long and short syllables reflecting the mora-timed aspects of Sinhala, *bàtá* vocables and drum language also use variable durations, but for entirely different reasons. Very short durations (flams) are used to signal vocal pitch glides, while longer durations indicate the frequent elisions found in Yoruba natural speech.

[3.3] I located other interesting components of *bera pada* that suggest they are part of humans' cross-cultural "hardware." Hughes (2000, 108–109) found that mnemonics containing the low-intensity vowels [i] and [u] frequently represent relatively short durations or are placed in metrically weak positions since they take less time to articulate orally. This is mostly the case in Peiris's examples, although he focuses on a different aspect

of their use. (Hughes's finding is true of Cuban *batá* vocables but works differently from Nigerian *bàtá* vocables because of the needs of the Yoruba language.) Hughes (99) also found that cross-culturally, consonant clusters such as [dl] and [kl] signal simultaneous notes/strokes or flams. Of these, Cuban *batá* drummers use [kl] (as [dl] does not exist in Spanish), whereas Yoruba drummers do not use any consonant clusters in their vocable system as there are none in their language. Conversely, although there are consonant clusters in Sinhala, they do not appear in *gäṭa beraya* vocables; if I am understanding correctly, there are no double strokes in the drumming Peiris describes due to the damping technique. Despite the numerous coherences I see between *bara pada* and the Yoruba and Cuban systems, they share few syllables as the way consonants and vowels are combined is subject to the conventions of the three unrelated languages.

[3.4] Any technical similarities between Sinhala, Yoruba, Cuban, and countless other acoustic-iconic drumming systems are due to musicians instinctively drawing from their common biological "hardware" within the limitations of their linguistic "software" as they orally mimic both speech and the sounds of their instruments. Whether or not musicians theorize as they do it may be culture-specific.

Conclusion

[4.1] Let us return to Peiris's two related questions at the beginning of his article: "How do *gäṭa beraya* drummers translate recited *bera pada* [drum vocable phrases] into strokes on the drum?" and "how might *gäṭa beraya* drummers be actively theorizing while performing?" Through presenting the main mechanics through which Sinhala poetry is converted into non-semantic vocables and explaining how these are interpreted on the drum, Peiris has portrayed the intellectual complexity of the historical context, literary corpus, generic musical system, and practical demands of *bera pada*. How or whether the drummers are theorizing during the process of transferring Sinhala to drum language remains somewhat speculative, or even theoretical.

[4.2] In this commentary, I have not argued that *gäṭa beraya* drummers do not theorize while performing. Rather, using my knowledge of the process of Yoruba drummers engaged in a very similar activity, I have questioned how much theorizing is going on while they are playing. Also influencing my scepticism is Hughes's conclusion that Japanese and Korean musicians "operate successfully without conscious awareness … of the principles underlying" their complex acoustic-iconic mnemonic systems (2000, 108). By questioning the process of *gäṭa beraya* drummers *in situ*, I am not devaluing the immense knowledge or technical expertise demanded to be able to do so. Nor am I underestimating the theoretical underpinning of the three-way translation process of semantic utterance to non-semantic vocable to instrumental representation. The ability to transform speech into a machine language requires two levels of translation from utterance to vocable to musical expression, which requires memorization and possibly theorization. Perhaps there is theorization outside of ritual performance and in the lifetime training of a lineage *gäṭa beraya* drummer. To be clear, I am not assuming that the training and practice of Sinhala drummers require less intellectual development and creativity than any other kind of professional musician.

[4.3] What is less clear from reading the article is how much of the theorization presented here has come from Peiris and other theorists outside of the caste-based lineage within which drummers like Muddanave Sunil are educated. What influence (if any) has postcolonial musical analysis had on the thinking of Sinhala ritual drummers? Are there any lineage caste members who have trained as (ethno)musicologists and who have influenced contemporary musical thought within the ritual lineage, or even led the academic field? Does it matter whether *gäṭa beraya* drummers theorize while playing? Ultimately, it does matter because many of the musicians with whom academic researchers partner are socially stigmatized and marginalized by the larger culture (which is certainly true of Yoruba Àyàn lineage drummers). Perhaps researchers of global majority musics still cannot assume the same privileges as theorists of Western music to describe musical systems on their own terms. Maybe Peiris's most important contribution with this article is its effort to decolonize musical epistemology.

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