

What Is a Part?
Polyphony between Perception and Conception

Susanne Fürniss

Abstract

For an ethnomusicologist, it is a particular challenge to approach the analysis and theorization of traditional music both from the “scientific” perspective – with the tools of (ethno)musicology – and from the “autochthonous” one – through the musical concepts that operate in the local culture. Such a twofold approach offers an enriching perspective, not only for evaluating of how insiders and outsiders conceive the music, but also in terms of a differentiated use of musicological concepts and terms.

This article concerns polyphonic techniques in two oral traditions (Aka from the Central African Republic and Baka from Cameroon) and the relationship between the conceptualization of the parts, their reference patterns, as well as modalities of realization and variation. As soon as several voices are heard together, the *musicologist* tries to classify the acoustical result and to determine the polyphonic technique. Although quite often several techniques are combined, this type of classification makes it quite possible to depict large musically relevant categories. But when the *anthropologist* crosses the musicological classification with autochthonous categories of musical parts and their realization, what is clearly defined acoustically as being multipart music may eventually be considered as several simultaneous appearances of the same part, certainly multiple, but still thought of as one.

This categorial divergence may reveal such an important gap between scientific and local conceptions that it leads to a refining of musicological categories.

For an ethnomusicologist, it is a particular challenge to approach the analysis and theorization of traditional music both from the “scientific” perspective – with the tools of (ethno)musicology – and from the “autochthonous” one – through the musical concepts that operate in the local culture. Such a twofold approach offers an enriching perspective, not only for evaluating of how insiders and outsiders conceive the music, but also in terms of a differentiated use of musicological concepts and terms.

In one of his articles on the categorization of anthropological objects, the French linguist and anthropologist Frank Alvarez-Pereyre (2004: 61) questioned the appropriateness of analytical categories and insisted on the fact that scientific categories are just as indigenous as those that are used in any specific culture. Transposed to ethnomusicological concerns, this leads to two main questions:

1) To what extent does the musicological approach match that of the culture it studies, or, in other words: in which cases do autochthonous conceptions of music operate on the same basis, i.e. with the same criteria as musicology?

2) As musicological concepts carry their own historical and geographical backpack, but are used by a large number of people as “objective, non-temporal” references, how can they be refined in order to be applicable to music from different times and places without betraying the theoretical considerations that underlie the music’s existence?

The present article concerns vocal polyphonic techniques in oral tradition and the relationship between reference patterns, their realization and variation. Although this is a general issue in ethnomusicology, the main thread of the argument will be my research on Aka music from Central African Republic and Baka music from Cameroon,¹ both so-called “Pygmy” cultures which have a common historical origin (Bahuchet 1992). Though close, these ethnonyms name two different societies: the Aka (or BaAka), who speak a Bantu language, and the Baka, whose language belongs to the Ubangian language family.

Polyphony, multipart music, and plurilinearity

Peter Cooke’s excellent article on non-Western polyphony in the *Grove Music Online* (2007) is already points towards some of the questions considered here. His text is the entry point to the question to which new material will give some particular detailed insights in this paper.

¹ I conducted fieldwork among the Aka between 1989 and 1994 and among the Baka between 1999 and 2009.

In the general introduction of the article “Polyphony”, the *Grove Music Online* (Frobenius 2007) mentions “music in more than one part”. In his introduction to the section dedicated to non Western music, Cooke states that for some ethnomusicologists such as William P. Malm, for instance, polyphony covers all kinds of multipart singing, but that for others “all multi-part music is not necessarily polyphonic”. He quotes Simha Arom (1991), who reserves this term for music in two or more simultaneous parts which are melodically and rhythmically independent.

Since 1991 Arom has continued to develop this concept, together with seven other French scholars, Nathalie Fernando, Sylvie Le Bomin, Fabrice Marandola, Emmanuelle Olivier, Hervé Rivière, Olivier Tourny and myself. We established a typology of polyphonic techniques in orally transmitted music, which was published in Italian in the *Einaudi Enciclopedia della Musica* (Nattiez 2005) and in French in *Musiques. Une encyclopédie pour le XIXe siècle* (Nattiez 2007). The following can be read there:

“A general agreement has been reached to consider as polyphony all music that does not come under monody – music in unison or in octaves – i.e. every plurilinear manifestation, independent of the modalities in which it appears”² (Arom et al. 2005: 1065).

The standpoint has shifted: in *Grove*, the definitions insist on the presence of several “parts”: they therefore concern the conception of the musical construction. Here the definition looks more at what can be heard by a musicologist by introducing the concept of “plurilinearity”. As Arom had already mentioned earlier (1991: 20), “this denomination has the advantage of being neutral as it mentions a phenomenon without indicating by which musical technique it is realized”. This definition is quite cautious. It stays deliberately on an observer’s – or auditor’s – standpoint, allowing one to embrace whatever music with the same criteria.

What is a part?

But why – at this very general stage of description – not use the term multipart music? Here the ethnologist interferes in the musicologist’s business by asking: what is a “part” for you? The notion of a “part” is indeed the basic issue of the confrontation between autochthonous and scholarly conceptions concerning polyphony, and it is at the centre of the present argument. It challenges the idea of performing together in an organized way. A broad characterization of “parts” could be different melodic or rhythmic expressions executed within the same piece, identified as such by the musicians. There may be a specific vernacular denomination for each utterance. In this sense, one must admit that several parts can join in different types of formal organisations.

The most important formal organisation in Africa is a responsorial alternation between two parts. In the Aka culture, the call is named *mòtàngòlè* (“the one who counts”) and the response *ósésé* (“below”) (Arom 1994) no matter which way the “song” (*lémbò*) is expressed. Call and response may be declaimed as in example 1.³

They may be sung *a cappella*, as in one of the very rare monodic songs (Ex. 2).

But in the very common African situation of call and response between a soloist and a choir, it says nothing about the vertical aspect of the choir’s part.

They may also be accompanied by a harp-zither or a harp (Ex. 3).

In performance practice, overlapping as a result of variation may be so important that, in many cases, it hides the basic responsorial structure by a simultaneous unfolding of the parts throughout nearly the whole cycle. But this aspect of the temporal chaining of parts will be left aside here in order to concentrate on what is happening within one formal section that is conceptually executed by several singers.

² All translations to English by the author. As the definitions have initially been shaped out in French, I provide also the French version for all quotations. “On s’accorde généralement pour considérer comme polyphonie tout ce qui ne relève pas de la monodie – musique exécutée à l’unisson ou à l’octave –, c’est-à-dire toute manifestation plurilinéaire, indépendamment des modalités selon lesquelles elle se manifeste.” (Arom et al. 2007: 1088)

³ Examples 1, 2, and 4 have been recorded by Simha Arom and transcribed by Susanne Fűrmiss. All other examples have been recorded and transcribed by S. Fűrmiss.

mòtángòlè ósêsê

é ndó - sí kù - ká - kò - ngò

Example 1. *Ndosi*. Song for the “infant whose mother is pregnant again”.
(CD *Anthology of Aka Pygmy Music* track I, 14.)

mòtángòlè ósêsê

kó - ngó - bè - lè a hi - a kó - ngó - bè - lè a hi - a

Example 2. *Kòngòbele* (“Wading bird”). Playsong.
(CD *Anthology of Aka Pygmy Music* track I, 17.)

Harp-zither

mòtángòlè

ósêsê

kà kú - dù é...
é... é...

Example 3. *Ka kudu* (“Its only Turtle”). Song with harp-zither (author’s archives).⁴

⁴ Similar examples can be heard on the CD *Aka Pygmies: Hunting Love & Mockery Songs*.

overlapping

mòtàngòlè

sé- sè - ngò - sé - sè - ngò é é é nà ká - wí kò bíá - mù bí - à kò - nà é é é

ósêsê

Exemple 4. *Sesengo* (“The spine”). Song of the tale *dikèmè* (“The Guinea Fowl”) (archives S. Arom).

Realisation of the same part in two lines

The choir’s response to the soloist’s call may be monodic – the group singing in unison –, as can be found in Burundi music (CD *Burundi. Musiques Traditionnelles* track 2). Or it may contain several simultaneous melodic lines, i.e. it may be plurilinear, as the majority of African call and response music. In this case, the central question has to be asked again: what is a part? Everyone may hear that there are several simultaneous melodic lines, but what is their status from the musicians’ viewpoint? Are they considered as different complementary parts responding at the same time or as simultaneous and equivalent versions of the same – one and only – response part?

The Aka in parallels

The phenomenon of simultaneous versions of a unique part can be found in Aka music where the response – except for some playsongs – is always sung in two melodic lines (Ex. 4).

In Ex. 4, a soloist alternates with a choir singing roughly in homorhythmic parallel movement. In spite of a short structural overlapping, this is understood by the Aka as singing in two successive parts, again *mòtàngòlè* and *ósêsê*. The polyphonic realisation of the response in two melodic lines is considered as being the embroidering of the choir’s only responding part, *ósêsê*.

At this point, a short digression to linguistics is necessary. The Aka language is a tone language in which the syllables are pronounced on different relative pitches.⁵ The consequence on song structure is that there are some rules for doubling the melody when it contains lyrics sung by all singers together. Contrary to Kofi Agawu’s findings in Ewe music, where there seems to be a relative independence of melody and speech tones (Agawu 1988), Aka music demands an identical melodic contour of two simultaneous melodic lines. In this, it follows the same rules as other Central African cultures (Eno Belinga 1970; Bois 1981; Fürniss, Guarisma 2004). The metrical organisation makes for the integration of the common pronunciation of the words in a clearly defined rhythm.


Ex. 4 is an example of a systematized plurilinearity as, from an acoustic point of view, there are two distinct reproducible “voices”. But is it simultaneous multipart singing? For the Aka, the only conceptualized parts are the call and the response. The two melodic lines of the response *ósêsê* are not differentiated. In the performance practice, the dual nature of the response gives the participants a great flexibility. They are free to choose the initial tessitura and their melodic pathway through the material, as individual singers are allowed to switch from one line to another at any point in the melody. Doing this, they are not locked up in the constraints of the homorhythmic parallelism, but they have the possibility to vary their singing without betraying the lyrics of their part.

While the Aka’s conception is well outlined by these observations, as a musicologist, I would like to go a little further into music theory. Arthur Morris Jones’ and Gerhard Kubik’s works on the relation between a pentatonic scale and an 8-5-4 harmony (Jones 1959; Kubik 1968) are corroborated by Aka music: the *ósêsê* is generally realized

⁵ Aka is classified as a Bantu C10-language (Guthrie 1971). As an illustration of the lexical tones in this language: *mbóká* (high-low) “village”, *mbòká* (low-high) “cultivated field ready to be harvested”, *mbóká* (high-high) “African palm civet, *Nandinia binotata*” (Thomas et al. 1993: 121–124).

in two melodic lines of identical contour, at a distance of a fourth. The “skipping process” established by Kubik (1968: 28–30) finds its application here: an anhemitonic pentatonic scale



gives way to several fourths and one major third by combining one degree with the next but one: . In the pentatonic configuration shown here, the complete system is only visible when the melody has an ambitus of an octave plus one degree. According to Kubik (ibid.), the lower line corresponds to the accompanying part.

When writing about parallelism, most authors implicitly take for granted that it covers the whole range of the scale. Aka music never realizes a parallelism which is extended over more than three successive degrees of the pentatonic scale. Therefore, it is not possible to clearly determine a musical predominance of one of the two melodic lines. This is confirmed by the musicians themselves, who consider the lines as completely equivalent without any distinction of value. There is no terminology to distinguish the two tessituras and neither of them is supposed to generate the other.

To conclude from this example, the musicologist hears two successive parts, the second of which is realized in two definable and reproducible lines. The unicity of the response – the reason why the Aka refute its essential plurality – is nevertheless easy to establish with musicological criteria since rhythm, melodic contour and lyrics are the same for the two lines. These criteria are the base on which the Aka’s and the scholar’s conceptions can meet.

Digression: Contrapuntal conception

Emic and etic criteria meet as well in counterpoint, which is the Aka’s main expression. It is also the icon of the musical identity of so-called “Pygmy” cultures.

Arom et al. define counterpoint as the following: “We understand by counterpoint every polyphonic construction founded on the superimposition of two or several distinct melodic lines with different rhythmic articulations” (Arom et al. 2005: 1072).⁶ In 1991, this had been Arom’s general definition for “polyphony”, quoted in Cooke’s article in the *Grove Music Online*. Further on in Arom et al., one reads:

[...] counterpoint is founded on a limited number of constituent parts – that are as many minimal versions – which the different participants enrich with various ornamentations, variants and variations. Most often, each of the parts has a name in the vernacular language, which proves that they originate from a conceptualization that happens before realization (Arom et al. 2005: 1073).⁷

This definition centres the argument on the number of initial constituent parts, thus switching from what may be perceived to how the music is conceived. The authors now talk about cases where the starting point of the autochthon’s conception is a simultaneity of several distinct parts.

Such an affirmation cannot be made without ethnographic enquiry. As already mentioned, in Aka music, counterpoint is the most common polyphonic technique. It is based on four constituent parts, each of which is named and has distinctive features (Arom 1994). For every song, each of the four parts has its own essential melodic pattern.

The four parts are:

- the *mòtàngòlè*, literally “the one who counts”, which is generally sung by a man. It is the principal voice that contains the essential words of the song and allows the other singers to identify the piece without ambiguity;

- the *ósèsè*, literally “below” (which means inferior in hierarchy to the *mòtàngòlè*), a female middle voice characterized by fairly little melodic and rhythmic movement;

- the *ngué wà lémbò*, literally “the mother of the song”, which is a male part as well. It is generally situated lower and has longer rhythmic values than the *mòtàngòlè*;

⁶ French version: “On entend ici par contrepoint tout édifice polyphonique fondé sur la superposition de deux ou plusieurs lignes mélodiques distinctes dont l’articulation rythmique diffère” (Arom et al. 2007: 1095).

⁷ French version: “[...] le contrepoint est fondé sur un nombre limité de parties constitutives qui sont autant d’épures mélodiques et que les différents participants enrichissent par de nombreuses ornementsations, variantes et variations. Le plus souvent, chacune de ces parties porte un nom dans la langue vernaculaire, ce qui prouve bien qu’elles procèdent d’une conceptualisation en amont de la réalisation.” (Arom et al. 2007: 1096).

Example 5. *Mabe* (“Subtlety”). Divination song (author’s archives).

Example 6. *No ma* (“Rain drops”). Song for the second funerals (author’s archives).

Example 7. *No ma*. Inversion of melodies.

These three parts are sung with the chest voice.

– the *dìyèí*, literally “yodel”, is sung above all the other parts by women. It is determined by the yodel technique, i.e. the alternation of head voice and chest voice.

The three latter parts do not use words, but are sung with meaningless syllables. The following modeled transcription of *mabe*, a divination song, gives an idea of the interaction of the parts. It has been obtained by the analytical rerecording technique (Arom 1976) which allows for the successive isolation of the individual parts.

Each part generates variations that follow different techniques and rules, which are illustrated in detail in Fűrniiss (2006).

As far as we know, the Aka share four part counterpoint with the Wagogo and the Kuria in Tanzania (Vallejo 2004). More than four parts are extremely rare, as for instance the Dorzé polyphonies in Ethiopia which have six parts (CD *Ethiopia. Polyphony of the Dorze*).

The Baka in counterpoint

As already mentioned, counterpoint is the icon of “Pygmy” music, but its use in Baka music from Cameroon leads us to question our analytical tools more critically.

The main principle of Baka singing is the call and response between a soloist and a choir. Again there are two successive parts: *kpó njàmba* (“to pick (gather) the beginning of a song”) and *na ja* (“to take”). But instead of realizing the response in a parallel movement as the Aka do, the Baka sing in two complementary lines. In their music, the words are reduced to an existential minimum, sung only by the leader. The choir is free from any linguistic constraint (Ex. 6).

The two lines of the response are terminologically distinguished as *ngbè liè* “the big voice” which is the lower one and *liè na téè* “the small voice” which is the higher one. What do these terms cover? It appears that the Baka make a distinction between the tessitura and the musical content. The two terms characterize the tessitura: to sing with a low or a high voice. If there is only one singer for the response, she will sing with a low voice, compared to which the high voice is considered as a complement. This hierarchy does not include the melodic line as particular musical material. Melody and tessitura are not conceptually linked. One may sing either of the melodies in either of the tessituras (Ex. 7).

In which classificatory drawer shall we put this notion of tessitura? The tessitura is quite a general criterion, and as a musicologist I would not like to stop the analysis at this point. In a scholarly conception of polyphony, the tessitura stands behind the dominating criterion of the melodic line, even behind the criterion of rhythmical articulation. From a musicological point of view there are two melodic lines in a contrapuntal relationship. As specific musical material, they are not named and not formed into a hierarchy. Compared to the Aka’s double realization of the response in parallel movement, it is much less evident to see the equivalence of the two melodic lines in the response part of the Baka music. In this case, we are definitely in a polyphonic technique that can be identified as counterpoint following the beginning of the definition quoted earlier: “We understand by counterpoint every polyphonic construction founded on the superimposition of two or several distinct melodic lines with different rhythmic articulations” (Arom et al. 2005: 1072).

In Baka music theory, there is a verbalized conception of complementary duality combined with a non verbalized conception of two melodic independent parts. Here we are in an intermediate zone between the notion of variation – *simultaneous but slightly different realizations of the same part* – and the notion of basic multipart singing – *simultaneous realization of different parts*. The secondary line in the high tessitura is not considered as a simple “variant” of the lower one, as it gives way in its turn to variations.

The concept of variation

The concept of variation – and particularly the *nature* of variation – is a crucial issue in our argument. Simultaneous variations of the same melody create denseness, which is an important aesthetic issue. What is significant here is that variation may create a distinct melodic line, but it does not necessarily create a distinct part.

Different types of variations are conceptualized in the musical discourse.⁸ The Baka call the

⁸ The Aka consider *kpokpo* (“straight on”), *kètè banyè* (“take a shortcut” or “take a small path alongside of the large way”), *kuka ngo dikukè* (“simply cut it”, a specific process of rhythmic variation), and *dìyèí* (“yodel”) (Fűrniiss 2006).

a) Call *kpo njamba*.

Musical score for 'Call *kpo njamba*'. The score consists of five staves of music in treble clef, 7/8 time signature. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 7/8 time signature. The music features a mix of eighth and quarter notes, with some notes beamed together. The second staff continues the melody with similar rhythmic patterns. The third staff shows a continuation of the melody with some rests. The fourth and fifth staves feature a more complex rhythmic pattern with many eighth notes, some of which are marked with a 'o' above them, possibly indicating a specific articulation or ornament.

b) Response *na ja*, higher tessitura *liè na tèè*.

Musical score for 'Response *na ja*, higher tessitura *liè na tèè*'. The score consists of five staves of music in treble clef, 7/8 time signature. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 7/8 time signature. The music features a mix of eighth and quarter notes, with some notes beamed together. The second staff continues the melody with similar rhythmic patterns. The third staff shows a continuation of the melody with some rests. The fourth and fifth staves feature a more complex rhythmic pattern with many eighth notes, some of which are marked with a 'o' above them, possibly indicating a specific articulation or ornament.

c) Response *na ja*, lower tessitura *ngbè liè*.

Example 8 a-c. *No ma*. Variants.

minimal version of a part *kpaje kpode* (“one path”) or *nde a banda* (“without reinforcement” > “simple”). The singer varies her part – *na penda be* (“to cross the song”, “to interweave the song”) – either singing “normally” – *gbèlè be* (“simple song”) – i.e. with the chest-voice, or using the yodel technique – *yeyi, yeli* or *ndando* (marked by a ° above the notes).

Examples 8 a-c display the inventory of variants sung during an analytical recording session⁹ with Baka women from Messéa. The melodic variants given in the first lines of the figures are the most refined versions and can therefore be characterized as the reference for the creation of variants. The first ones are sung “normally”, that is with the chest voice, and the last ones are yodelled. This variation technique is not applied to the lowest line of the response. Both rhythmic and melodic variations follow a set of rules that make their construction predictable. In a conventional ritual performance with between seven and thirty active singers, these variations intermingle to a large extent with overlapping that creates even greater density on another formal level.

Given the predictability of variants which are embedded in a set of rules, we are far away from “heterophony”. Though this term defines a “simultaneous variation of a single melody” as Cooke writes in the *Grove Music Online*, it should be reserved for those variations that are unpredictable: “heterophony is characterized by the *absence of any regularity* of the plurilinear phenomena. It is an intermediate category between monody and any type of systematized plurilinearity” (Arom et al. 2005: 1066).¹⁰ Vincent Dehoux and Monique Gessain (1992) illustrate this topic very well through Bassari music from Senegal, where the heterophonic realization of alternating choir

⁹ Adapting Arom’s method of rerecording (1976), the author recorded one singer after the other. The first singer sang with the rhythmic accompaniment. After a while, the second singer joined in and the first singer was asked to stop singing while the second one was heard alone. The same method was applied to the recording of the third singer.

¹⁰ French version: “L’hétérophonie se caractérise par l’*absence de toute régularité* des phénomènes plurilinéaires. Il s’agit là d’une catégorie intermédiaire entre la monodie et un type quelconque de plurilinearité systématisée” (Arom et al. 2007: 1089).

parts has its roots in aesthetic considerations and is conceptualized through a very rich metaphoric discourse:

[...] the most efficient technique [to make one's voice stand out from the others] is based on a process of relative heterophony [...] a good singer is the one who moves forward like a football player: he has to know how to *dribble*, to advance in *zig-zags*. [...] by adding small melismas, he will bring slight but continuous modifications to the trajectory of the melody, which has the effect of making him audible and drawing the auditors' attention to him (Dehoux, Gessain 1992: 28).

Theoretical outcome of conceptual divergence

The issue of multipart versus plurilinear music has already been a part of a joint comparative research project by Emmanuelle Olivier and Susanne Fűrnis on music of the Ju|hoansi Bushmen and the Aka Pygmies (1999). Based on an identical research method that allows for a direct comparison of every item analyzed, it provides an illustration of how two different basic conceptions can lead to a similar result. For the Aka, counterpoint is the starting point – it is multipart singing –, whereas for the Ju|hoansi it is the outcome – as the simultaneous variation of a monody.¹¹ Like the Baka, with the vernacular names the Ju|hoansi conceptualize a relative position in the sound space and a voice quality, but there is no tangible musical material, as this is expressed through the melody. However, this is the main operational criteria in the musicological definition of polyphony.

These phenomena oblige the ethnomusicologist to question the musicological concepts used. In this regard, the development of terminology which is as clear as possible is a crucial point. Two terms are questioned here: “polyphony” and “multipart singing”. The confrontation of musical analysis with the autochthonous conception brings to light the fact that these terms are not completely operational without some explanatory additions. Two planes of investigation appear, the perceptual and the conceptual one. These two planes may or may not converge.

In this sense, there is a stratification of the description which depends on the angle of the research and on the advancement of ethnographic enquiry. Independently from fieldwork, it is possible to establish a global classification of plurilinear music in the perspective of a comparative musicological study.

One cannot affirm, however, that a specific polyphony is multipart music. In the 1980 edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the quite condensed article on “polyphony” by Wolf Frobenius (1980: 70) insists twice on the “consciousness” or the “conception of a simultaneity of a number of parts”. This notion, which needs knowledge of local music theory, has been slightly lost in the new online edition.

Once one knows more about the cultural conceptions of the musical result, it is possible to go one level further in the detailed characterization of polyphony, i.e. to determine whether it is (or is not) multipart music. Indeed, to come back to the question “what is a part for you?”, the ethnologist may take the position that a part is what the autochthonous theory identifies as such. This is a radically one-sided position, which is anchored, as mentioned in the introduction, in the search for convergences between scholarly and autochthonous conceptions. The explanation of Aka parallel singing needed ethnographical enquiry. It leads to a certain adaptation of the scholarly view in order to elucidate the base criteria on which the two conceptions may meet in the recognition of a single response part.

The problem still remains to decide what status to give the unnamed plurilinear realizations of a same basic part as we find in Ju|hoan and Baka music. In both cases, it is the tessituras that are named and that form another categorial axis complementary to the two unnamed melodic lines. But naming is not the only argument for conceptualization. The intersection of the two axes appears as a stable analytical point that gives way to a double culturally relevant articulation: towards contrapuntal *realization* – as it obeys the same kind of variation rules as conceptual multipart singing – as well as towards monodic *conception*, by introducing a heuristic aspect of generating polyphony from monody. This intrication would

¹¹ Our approach has been criticized by Victor Grauer (2009). His analysis however did not take into account the fundamental ethnomusicological distinction between conception and acoustical result.

not have been perceptible without ethnography. Thus, from an ethnomusicological point of view, it becomes possible to consider that *the fundamental distinction which musicology makes between monody and polyphony might be inadequate in a certain cultural context.*

What is interesting coming back to this conceptual difference of simultaneous singing is that the examples presented here introduce two new criteria: another level of musical analysis, namely formal segmentation, and a conceptual divergence expressed through vernacular polysemics.

In Baka culture counterpoint is embedded in a call and response structure, whereas Aka culture uses a formally unique structure to oppose counterpoint to parallel singing in call and response. The fact that the Aka identically name the two successive parts of the call and response *and* two of the four simultaneous parts of the counterpoint reveals the point where the Cartesian separation of parameters finds its limits. The musicologist who wants to inscribe this polyphony in a worldwide comparative frame distinguishes between a successive unfolding of monodies and a simultaneous execution of complementary parts. In this sense, “multipart singing” concerns only the simultaneous superimposition of parts. The ethnologist who claims “that a part is what the autochthonous theory identifies as such” may have no problem to conceive of “multipart singing” as a monodic call and response. The desire for an overall valid and univocal terminology – that includes both scholarly and vernacular theories – causes the analyst to falter. Through the use the Aka make of their polysemic terminology, the limit appears clearly. The Aka have no problem with the different sounding realities of the parts *mòtàngòlè* and *ósésé*, because they are associated with different repertoires and different circumstances that imply different symbolic meanings: no confusion is ever possible (Fürniss 1999). For the Aka, the research for univocity in the terminology is irrelevant. Here we see the limits of sameness in scholarly and autochthonous categorization.

As an echo to Agawu’s reflections on “analyzing difference” (Agawu 2003) it seems to me that this implies not only describing music as much as possible with musicological tools, but also necessarily questioning their adequacy at any step of the analysis. Once one accepts Alvarez-Pereyre’s notion and admits that the Western musicological categories are also indigenous categories, one sees their limitations and they become possible to refine. When working with the Other, a sharpened view allows for a fertile introspection, which can then open up initially limited perspectives.

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