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# APPROCREATIONS

Weight of an Absent Ancestry

Maarika Autio: Approcreations – Weight of an Absent Ancestry

Pdf version of the multimedia exposition in Research Catalogue

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## Abstract

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In the globalising world, our cultural influences have become more diversified than ever. At the same time, the code of good conduct on honouring intercultural sources of inspiration is still being written in the collective consciences of artists and audiences alike. The current mindset is being explored in an artistic research project, of which the concert this article focuses on was a component.

“Approcreations”, an experimental solo concert, was atypical in terms of the conventions of the instruments played. The recital trialled the public’s receptiveness by developing pioneering uses for a tradition-oozing instrument while casting thoughts into the perception of artistic identity in the crossfire of preconceptions, aftermaths of colonialism and cultural appropriation disputes. Would the public’s sentiments differ from the performer’s expectations?

The author, having developed a time-tested perspective after decades of international touring as a non-African player of the Mande diatonic balafon, now zeroes in on the factors influencing how we interpret and feel about culturally complex art practices. Sociocultural and symbolic connotations of musical instruments are analysed in light of the affordance theory, and the instruments’ evolution from cultural assets into universal vehicles for human creativity is pondered upon. Video samples from the concert stage concretise words into sounds and colours. The outcome of this artistic component is then inquired based on both self-reflection and audience feedback.

Finally, as the controversy around cultural appropriation vs. inspiration extends beyond music to encompass a wider range of performing arts, the conclusion seeks to identify tendencies in the findings that might benefit art practitioners in other genres as well.

### Keywords

affordance, africa, artistic research,  
artistic identity, balafon,  
cultural appropriation, global music



## Prelude

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*What used to be inaccessible, inaudible and unknown is now the air we breathe. The melodies of once-so-distant cultures, all those vast worlds of sounds and colours, are stealthily weaving their way into our values as the ubiquitous web of infinite information erodes global distances. What a wonderful source of inspiration this opens up for artists – and what a controversial polemic it causes. Increased awareness and insistence on respectful usage of cultural elements are a most welcome and necessary development, but drawing boundaries can be challenging for both the public and creative artists. A mere tinge of suspicion towards cultural appropriation is enough to ignite bitter disputes in public media. Might excessive fear of cultural missteps begin to shackle artistic freedom?*

Describing the first milestone in an artistic research project, this article sheds light on a musical journey from early compositional ideas, technical challenges, and in-depth reflections leading to a recital exploring unprecedented forms of expression. Two words, appropriate and creation, are combined to introduce a new concept: *approcreating* describes creative processing that draws inspiration from other cultures while appropriately respecting the source of the influences. The Approcreations-recital was an artistic component in a doctoral research project exploring how instruments commonly regarded as representatives of a certain culture may become part of the artistic identity and expression of a non-native musician. Discussing the ethical dilemmas it addresses, the said research project seeks to find out how an increased understanding of cultural appropriation may inform the ways in which artists navigate these complex issues.

The main tool of the research is the diatonic balafon, a melodic percussion instrument of the Mande peoples of West Africa, augmented with live electronics. As far as is known, such live audio effects have not been applied to a balafon before. The kora, a harp-like instrument sharing similar cultural roots, plays a supportive role. Following an autoethnographic (Tarisayi, 2023; Ellis et al., 2011) approach, the author gets tossed into the toolkit as well, as their artistic identity is exposed to the crosshairs and mirrored against the image reflected in the feedback.

As an author, my insight sprouts from decades of international touring as a non-Mande balafonist. Since the early days of my career before the turn of the century, I have played my way through the evolution of the cultural appropriation concept from bud to blossom.

Initially, the motivation for this research was sparked by experiencing first-hand how profoundly time, geographic location, and social environment affect the responses towards culturally multi-sourced art. So much has happened since the nineties! The careless use of cultural elements as an exotic spice has evolved into pervasive wariness, posthumously transforming icons like Elvis from trailblazers to questionable exploiters (e.g., Jackson, 2019, pp. 1–8; Green, 2018, p. 61). Criticism has mostly been warranted, as earlier practices certainly required amendments. The cultural sources of art must indeed always be shown due respect. Still, at times, the fear of

cultural missteps may turn into over-cautiousness, as media debates flare up at the slightest suspicion of appropriation, pushing artists to rather play it safe (e.g., Lenard & Balint, 2020; Aikio, 2021; Kallioniemi & Siivikko, 2020; Nyman, 2021; etc.).

The pieces in the Approcreations-recital are self-composed and not based on traditional elements. However, this does not remove the need to ask whether writing your own material is enough to avoid all suspicions of malpractice, nor does it negate the need to critically examine the ongoing effects of colonisation and the power dynamics associated with a representative of a dominant culture behind an African instrument.

**T**he burden of colonialism is both transgenerational and transnational. As a Finn, I find it essential to emphasise the latter. Being educated in a country that did not directly participate in the colonisation of Africa does not equip you to anticipate the reception you will receive, nor does it absolve you of all responsibility. At school, the subject was covered rather superficially, almost completely from the angle of a distant observer. This even included blatant blind spots, such as no acknowledgment of the way Finns systematically trampled on the rights of the indigenous Sámi people in the northern region of our country. A deeper understanding began to dawn on me only gradually during my adult life.

Historical injustices continue to shape the way people interact with each other and the privileges they are afforded. A musician in the global north may relatively easily obtain visas, perhaps even institutional support to study music abroad, while their African peers face significant systemic barriers when seeking similar opportunities. The result is an asymmetry where the privileged have the possibility of accessing, learning from, and freely collaborating with artists from diverse corners of the globe, unlike their not-equally-privileged colleagues who face considerable barriers with travelling and disseminating their artistry outside their home continent.

Globally, more and more musicians are claiming the right to self-determination while rejecting stereotypical or pre-assumed ideas of ethnicity. Rising population diversity has led to growing numbers of mixed or hard-to-define ethnicities (Cleveland, 2024, pp. 65–88), making it difficult for many to identify the cultural roots of their music unambiguously. Consequently, categorising and promoting gets more complex, reducing their chances of being selected as event performers. Should African elements be present in the art, both the origin and the physical appearance of the product/combo seem to take on a particular significance. Recently, a Finnish colleague, Marjo Smolander, observed how much easier it was to book engagements for a band playing distinctly Malian music with mainly native performers compared to her other, more multiculturally profiled African-inspired collaborations (M. Smolander, personal communication, 27.03.2025). Even on native Africans, too fair a skin has reportedly led festival organisers to reverse their previous clearances for African-themed music stages (Krings, 2015).

Non-natives incorporating African elements into their art must recognise that their work exists within a historical context where those sounds have been both excluded and appropriated, or where their artistic connotations have been trivialised into an exotic otherness in contrast to

dominant cultural frameworks. Rooted in colonial history, this sonic alterity continues to shape how non-Western music is engaged with, marginalising it while simultaneously fueling Western fascination.

**B**earing all this in mind, self-awareness and humility emerge as vital virtues for a non-native instrumentalist. However, maintaining a realistic and truthful understanding of how our actions may be interpreted by others is a challenge, especially when we are easily carried away by the spell of creative inspiration. This adds to the essential ingredients that have motivated this research and provides yet another reason to expose my artistic identity to possible criticism.

## Interludes

The chapters in this article guide the reader from the first musical experiments to the evaluation of the concert along the following steps:

Never alone may be taken as a continuation of this prelude. Its writing style, differing from the rest of the article, represents a door opening into artistic research methodology where art is used as a tool instead of an object (e.g., Varto, 2018; Hannula et al., 2014). The choice of style also pays homage to the storytelling tradition of the Mande peoples by deepening the autoethnographic approach with an autofictional (Effe & Lawlor, 2022) narrative about a real-life event in the narrator's past. Through interpersonal and internal dialogue, the text reflects on the significance of ancestry in an ancient family tradition and elucidates the ethical considerations contributing to the narrator's subsequent artistic choices.

Techniques and distortions dives into the structural specificities, possibilities, and limitations of the balafon. It introduces the technical platform for expanding the instrument's sonic expression into innovative dimensions and opens up some of its distinctive attributes, influencing the work approach, progress, and sonic outcome.

Tradition and theories takes an exploratory look at the interaction of social and cultural elements concerning the intermediating instruments – i.e. their sociocultural significance. Balafon's and kora's creators, the jali caste of the West African Mande social hierarchy, is presented, along with light shed on the author's initiation into the jalis' hereditary trade secrets. Applying the affordance theory (Gibson, 2014, pp. 119-135; McDonnell, 2023, p. 201-203; Sun & Suthers, 2021; Tullberg, 2022) to musical instruments and mirroring against cultural appropriation (e.g., Agawu, 2016, pp. 305-335; Britannica, 2023; Siems, 2019, pp. 408-423; Young, 2008) discussion I observe how their symbolic substance changes with geographical location, and speculate when the cultural ties relax enough to liberate them into socioculturally neutral tools for human creativity.

Next, the performance concept and the individual pieces in Approcreations – the concert are presented, specifying which elements paid tribute to the Mande tradition and which were

brought in to introduce experimental musical dimensions. Words get converted into melodies and rhythms as video excerpts from the recital in Helsinki Music Centre on the 10th of April 2024 concretise what the above means in practice. In the concert, visuals played an important role: Subtly changing graphics were projected on the stage backdrop to enhance the overall sensory experience. Unfortunately, the camera on a static tripod cropped out most of the images, so to convey a more authentic overall impression, some of them are scattered throughout this article as text illustrations.

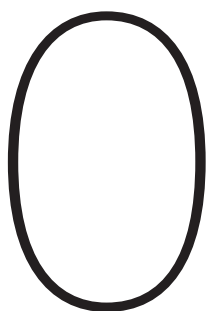
When the dust settles and the last notes fade out, it is time for Analysing the applause. The public feedback is weighed against the performer's aftertaste to observe how the theories and hypotheses translate into practice. Was the response as anticipated, or did the reactions noticeably differ from what was expected? The findings are reflected upon to see if they offer some insights into addressing the affordance of culturally bound musical instruments or contribute to opening up perspectives on the intricate controversy between cultural appropriation and inspiration.

In the Conclusive coda, the entire concert project is consolidated into a summary evaluating how the pre-assumptions and research objectives were met in this artistic component. The conclusion seeks to identify guidelines from the outcome that might prove fruitful for musicians, performing artists in other fields of art, and art-loving audiences alike.

## Never alone

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If you ask a storyteller if it truly happened, you will hear that it did. In this reality or the one just beyond sight and touch. Introducing fictional aspects may at times deepen the reader's understanding by opening up intangible dimensions. Here, autofictional style (see, e.g., Effe & Lawlor, 2022) was used within an autoethnographic approach in order to provide a more comprehensive description of the author's ethical, identity-questioning reflection, laying the foundations for later music-making with the balafon. The following story depicts what took place in real life in this world – or the one just beyond:



On that day, the deadline was breathing down my neck. While deadlines bring results, they don't have a favourable effect on creativity. Inventiveness requires a relaxed, idle mindset and ample time to mess around, fail, and discover. In my head, the plan was clear: the piece to be composed should contain nimbly flowing musical thoughts in an arhythmic, semi-improvisational stream – in other words, it should represent a daring leap towards a style I had never used on stage before.

Walking over to my balafon, I checked that all ten cables were correctly connected, scanned



quickly through the microphones to ensure that none of them had visibly moved, switched on the computer, channel splitter and audio interface, and buckled down to work. Warming up took more time than usual.

**B:** I don't feel comfortable with this.

**M (me):** I know. But please be patient, and let me try for a little longer. Please.

Muffling all doubts, I continued experimenting, re-adjusting and fine-tuning the live audio effects filling my headphones. Brow in a frown, I struggled to find a way for the basic idea, my hands and sonic outcome to somehow collaborate.

**B:** Hey. Do you remember that soft-eyed young balafola<sup>1</sup> in the Gambia? You know who I mean. What was his name?

**M:** No. I mean, I do remember him, but not his name.

He was not anyone I knew, merely a passing-by member of a local musician family. Kouyate... Or Diabate? A solid jali<sup>2</sup> surname anyway, as solid as his instrumental virtuosity. We only met that one time. The wedding party where I was supposed to play had been delayed, so together with a few other musicians we waited, on a dusty alley by the party courtyard, killing time in an impromptu jam session. The soft-eyed balafola joined in, and we had a short but intense musical dialogue with two balafons. When we felt the time was ripe, we agreed on a mutual exclamation mark, leaned back and laughed.

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<sup>1</sup> Balafola = balafon player.

<sup>2</sup> Jali (spelling may vary) refers to members of the musician families, jalis being a caste in the ancient social hierarchy of the Mande peoples.

Backdrop imagery for the piece "Kilin Fula Saba"



He tilted his head and gazed at me as if trying to read my mind, seemingly puzzled.

**B:** Yay! This is the part that I like the most! He first asked if he could ask you something and then if you could feel it. You asked, “Feel what?” and he said, “I think you can!” And then, then he said...

**B + M:** “You are never alone when you play the balafon.”

Sometimes the shortest moments leave the longest-lasting memories. The problem is that you may not recognise their value instantly, as you can’t foresee how they end up carving permanent runes in your mind. His sincerity was evident: he clearly confided in me, trusting I would be worthy of the secret and that I would understand. His Wolof was way worse than mine, English and French nearly as scarce as my Mandinka, so he had to use his hands to fill in gaps in our shared vocabulary. Still, he was able to make his point very clear. It was not the physical world he was referring to, with barefoot children sitting on the fence listening, but the intangible dimension one may sometimes feel but never see. The spiritual, some say the magical aspect of life.

**M:** He was talking about his ancestors, wasn’t he? Those past generations of balafon jalis, his very bloodline. The pride and joy of keeping the family tradition alive fills his music with meaning, messages, memories, and stories from times gone by. His music.

**B:** Well, yes. That may well be so. But if he meant his ancestors only, then why would he pose the question to you the way he did? You’re not a jalimuso<sup>3</sup>. Some may call you that as a compliment, but you’ll always be an outsider. A toubab<sup>4</sup>.

**M:** What are you saying? That the spirits enriching your melodies have nothing to do with bloodline and upbringing? When I carried you here, were they hiding inside the bag as well? That doesn’t make any sense! Why would they bother to come here? Finland, of all places! We’re too far from your birth region. The culture here is completely different, and the music speaks another language.

To emphasise my words, I geared up into a conversation-halting crescendo. From there, I plunged into a capriciously meandering solo, attempting to introduce new ways of expression into my playing instead of always falling back to that back-pocket toolkit of safe escapes that every performing musician develops over time. For a good while, my concentration was intense, completely free of words, self-doubts, and calculated, burdensome aims. Then, as my zeal gradually withered, thoughts began resurfacing.

**B:** Don’t you think he could have meant your dedication, passion, and respect for the tradition? It is plain for anyone to see that you have devoted years of your life to this art,

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<sup>3</sup> Jalimuso = jali woman.

<sup>4</sup> Toubab, also written tubaab, tubap etc. = A non-offensive name for the foreigners in West-Africa



studying and practising. You're no exoticism-seeking, cream-cropping tourist. Wouldn't such an attitude validate you as a rightful balafola despite your non-native origin?

**M:** But on that day, we were playing acoustically, in a traditional style. Now look at yourself! I've plugged you into all these machines, toying with live audio effects until your in-built voice gets completely distorted. No wonder you keep complaining! You're an instrument loaded with tradition, each key practically oozing sociocultural significance. Am I trespassing in a private zone here, overstepping the appropriate limits for an outsider? Wouldn't my maverick experimentation have all such ancient spirits fleeing with horror and distaste – that is, if they even exist, given that you're nothing but chunks of wood and a few odd pumpkin gourds?

A heavy silence fell. Silence implies consent, doesn't it, so I took it as a sign that I had won the debate. Not feeling triumphant, though.

**B (balafon):** And yet, here you are, talking with me.

## Techniques and distortions

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The West African balafon of the Mande peoples is an idiophone, a melodic percussion instrument played with two relatively heavy mallets. The keys are carved from the African rosewood tree, *Pterocarpus erinaceus*, dried and roasted over smouldering sawdust in an oven specifically constructed for this purpose. Back in the 80s, the number of keys was estimated to be 17–22, with 19 being the most common practice (Jessup, 1983, p. 16; Kenneth and Duràn, 1984, as cited in Piškor, 2001, p. 43). In 2021, Lisa Feder unambiguously stated the number of keys to be 23, without specifying any range (Feder, 2021, p. 3) – but this I'd take with great caution, as variation is a given. Based on personal observations in my professional network, the usual number has grown slightly during the past decades. The specimen my teacher donated to me in the late 90s had 20 keys. Today, I count at least 21, but most often 22 keys in balafons of professional quality.

The mallet knobs are tied from caoutchouc strips, prepared from the sap extracted from a rubber tree. Caoutchouc has maintained its popularity, although a handy and time-saving workaround is to use a bicycle inner tube, especially in the tourist souvenir balafons (Jessup, 1983, p. 16), as well as, most recently, in music augmented with live audio effects produced by the undersigned. The struck sound from the bicycle tube mallets is softer and thus less intrusive when aiming



Backdrop imagery for the piece "Then – Now"

for an altered sonic illusion while still being strong enough to produce a clear signal for the contact microphones. Or as clear as it can be, given the distortion effect inherent in the core characteristics of the instrument, which we will focus on next.

### **To buzz or not to buzz**

Balafon's distinctive acoustic sound is flavoured by the sassy buzzing originating from the resonating membranes glued to the calabash gourds under each key. This type of distortion, at times referred to as buzz aesthetics, is characteristic of many African instruments across the continent (for example Driver, 2017, pp. 95–118; Thomson, 2021, pp. 57–64). Given that sonic aesthetics vary wildly on a global level, such a feature may be perceived as a virtue or a flaw. While Christopher Small wryly notes that “as Harry Partch was not the first one to point out, there is no sound that is enjoyed in one culture that is not thought of as horrible noise in another” (Small, 2012, p. 117), Nathan Riki Thomson fondly recalls his ilimba teacher Hukwe Zawoze's words about the buzz “feeding the soul of an instrument” (Thomson, 2021, p. 60).

The question of whether or not to allow things to buzz has influenced my artistic decisions for years. Balafon's calabash membranes are fickle and react unpredictably to temperature and humidity changes. This complicates matters, particularly in terms of sound amplification, introducing displeasing unevenness to the sonic output. I know of professionals who, tired of the stress, have torn away the membranes before entering amplified concert stages. In contrast, I recently found myself increasing the distortion by replacing and thinning the said nuisances. As a general rule, I'd still say that despite the frustration of some individuals, nearly all balafons still buzz. But, with the kora, the situation is different: by definition, vintage kora recordings retain a considerably rougher distortion than the recent ones. This development has not been left unnoticed. Merlyn Driver voices his concern about the gradual dilution of the scratchy approach in Mande music in favour of the Western quest for a smooth ideal. Comparing the buzz to a ritual mask, sonic instead of visual, he recognises in it multi-layered sociocultural indications pointing towards animistic beliefs and the omnipresence of the spiritual world (Driver, 2017, pp. 95–118). Unlike Driver, I do not feel qualified to comment on the possible or impossible presence of the supernatural in the buzz, much less on its impact on aesthetic preferences. My field interpretations tend to yield back towards the simplest base: a different concept of aesthetics. I quote a piece of wisdom heard from several Mande musicians, which I find comforting in other areas of life as well, that nothing without a perceptible flaw can be truly beautiful.

Maintaining the buzz was one of the reasons why I chose the current microphone setup for my balafon. First, I was merely looking for a solution that would guarantee a powerful, natural-sounding signal for the PA. Balafons are typically amplified from above using one or two acoustic microphones. As space is left between the keys and the microphones, louder instruments such as percussion tend to overpower the balafon as the intensity of the concert builds up. Therefore, I ended up ordering a separate microphone for each key, 22 of them altogether, connected to a single output. They are not piezos but dynamic microphones, attached to the keys with a 2–3mm layer of detachable wax. This setup produces

not only a fairly decent life-like sound but captures some of the calabash buzzing as well – something the piezos would not, as in immediate contact with the resonator they read sound vibrations instead of air-transmitted waves. On noisy stages, the build worked well, and I was pleased with it. A thought-provoking bonus was the soon-to-follow realisation that the signal would be clean enough to enable the use of live audio effects.

Intrigued by this prospect, I rounded up the rest of the equipment. A colleague had a redundant audio interface lying around, equally outdated and, thus, compatible with my laptop. A foot switch with eight knobs, a DI-box, a channel splitter, and studio-quality headphones completed the setup, and I was ready to dive into the basics of live audio effect programming.

The project evolved into a pioneering quest, as based on the best available knowledge, similar sonic experimenting had not been done with balafoon before. Despite computer processing having entered the game, limitations to sound-altering possibilities still exist. The original signal remains an acoustic wave. It is not a hit-triggered digital impulse: one cannot pick any MIDI instrument from the program library to replace the source qualities. Balafoon's sound is a short, sharp hit with practically no sustain, and, as noted, spiced with lively varying buzz distortion. Extending note length, for example, is quite challenging. Also, a substantial amount of computing power is needed to process audio effects in a live performance without notable lag, clicks, momentary blackouts or total system crashes, as I soon learned. Composing pieces turned into a solution-oriented balancing act between the original vision and technical constraints. Furthermore, there were certain ethical concerns and theoretical angles to consider.

Backdrop imagery for  
the piece "Ruusupuu"



## Tradition and theories

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Next, I will approach the intriguing ethical aspects of balafon's unconventional usage from two angles: the sociocultural meaning for the Mande peoples and those familiar with their tradition, and the symbolic, contextual meaning for those who are not. In other words, I will open up what the balafon stands for to the peoples whose cultural heritage it represents and then ponder on its symbolic significance in foreign eyes. Given that the balafon is generally recognised as a traditional African instrument, its mere physical appearance may be enough to arouse preconceptions in audiences about how it should be played and by whom.

These phenomena may be viewed through the lens of affordance theory: how the use and meaning of an object are defined, particularly reflecting upon when an instrument's cultural ties are loosened enough for it to be re-imagined as a vehicle for artistic creativity. I will unpack the concept of affordance theory further in the following sections.

### Jalis, me, and nyama



Backdrop imagery for the piece "Kilin Fula Saba"

Balafon and kora are instruments of the jalis, a caste in the social hierarchy of the Mande peoples in pre-colonial West Africa. The role of the jalis included preserving oral tradition, storytelling, recounting the noble deeds of both their present and past patrons and, last but not least, musicianship, which entitled them to play the hereditary jali instruments. (E.g., Williams, 2006, pp. 26–28; Feder, 2021, pp.2–3; Piškor, 2001, pp. 43–48; Charry, 2000, p. 43; Jessup, 1983, pp. 12–15). To some extent, traces of this ancient hierarchy can still be seen, particularly in that the majority of the practitioners of these instruments still bear jali surnames.

The art of balafon and kora was, and still primarily is, passed on within the family, from generation to generation, and more particularly from men to boys, as playing these instruments was reserved solely for the male gender (e.g., Williams, 2006, pp. 28–29; Piškor, 2001, pp. 51–57). Male jalis had their roles, as did the females. Outsiders could and would not enter this closed circle – why would they, in an established social hierarchy? However, over time, globalisation and increased travelling may occasionally create new openings. I found one in an open-minded master jali, curious to see how a complete outsider with a foreign lineage and of incorrect gender could learn a guarded family tradition.

In Dakar in the early 90s, Jali Alsegy Camara gave me the basic traditional training of a balafola apprentice. He repeatedly stressed that what he taught me was the “genuine stuff” and not “makeshift whatever to part the tourists with their money”. I vaguely understood that I was being initiated into what felt like a circle of secrecy, although it would take me years to fathom more of its implications. Joe Williams (2006, p. 63–68) aptly describes this guarding of the hereditary arts, summarising that a jali must “undergo years of rigorous apprenticeships, guard his traditional knowledge carefully, and be very careful to whom and how much he reveals his knowledge” (Williams, 2006, p. 65). My teacher took the initiation quest seriously, making it a point of honour not to ask me to pay anything for the tuition and offering me daily meals at his house, thus equating me with the other apprentice, who was his nephew. When the months of intense training were over, he rinsed my hands with green herbal liquid in what seemed like a spiritual ritual, solemnly declaring that this was it, I was ready. “This is as much as anyone gets. Now you go and discover the rest.”

Without an inherited family network, accumulating additional instrumental knowledge and absorbing their multifaceted societal connotations has been a challenge. On the other hand, being an outsider has some advantages. Mande women are expected to fulfil their social roles and conduct their lives accordingly, whereas their toubab peers (a non-offensive name for the foreigners), without similar family support, but also without similar expectations, are allowed to behave differently, as a sort of wild card in the deck. This might include spending their days learning traditionally male instruments like the balafon, for example.

From a sociocultural perspective, instruments are more than objects. Jali instruments are emblematic indicators mirroring one’s rank and role in a community, and playing them amounts to so much more than mere technical execution. The act of playing is a participatory, active and ongoing social dialogue, a way of marking important milestones in people’s lives and preserving the ancestral heritage. In a wider societal range, the instruments become culturally identifying factors, solidifying a sense of belonging both in the original homeland and global diaspora. Considered capable of “unifying cultural construct” and “withstanding the threats brought by cultural occupation and contemporary globalization” (Williams, 2006, p. 18), the jali instruments are powerful symbols layered with multifarious meanings. Reflecting the spiritual beliefs of their creators, their influential range reaches from this world to the intangible one, as on top of their other skills the jalis were believed to be able to channel the nyama, the omnipresent supernatural force (Wise, 2006, pp. 19–38; Williams, 2006; Charry 2000, pp. 49–50). The nyama could be harnessed for beneficial or malicious purposes and released in multiple ways, typically through speech or singing. A well-versed jali like my mentor could apparently even capture it in a green magic potion. Playing an instrument was an especially effective way to wield it, as “this spiritual force resides in the balafon to be awakened by the musician who releases the nyama” (Williams, 2006, 18).

However, as questioned in the chapter “Never alone”, would the hidden spiritual dimension be capable of travelling, or would its potential wither in the absence of a reinforcing environment? Inevitably, the symbolic representation of these instruments changes on foreign soil, as the force



of the nyama gets reduced to questioningly raised eyebrows. This drastic change in perception parallels the key arguments of the affordance theory, which I will now outline further.

### **Angle on affordances**

First introduced by James J. Gibson back in 1977, the affordance theory claims that we do not perceive objects solely according to their axiomatic purpose but also based on what they mean to us (Gibson, 2014, pp. 119-135). If a thing is shaped, seems and feels like something you would sit on, you use it as a chair. As the object grows more complex, varied ways of use become possible. Applied to musical instruments, the argument could be, for example, that a flute is a flute only if we know that one can produce melodies with it; otherwise, it may be seen as an impractical drinking tube.


However, Gibson, as far as is known, was not thinking of flutes when formulating his theses. Having overlooked other prospects as well, his original version of the theory has been criticised as limiting (e.g., Tullberg, 2022; Sun & Suthers, 2021; Shaw et al., 2019; Windsor & De Bézenac, 2012), disregarding, aspects like the influence of cultural values and meanings, for example (Sun & Suthers, 2021, p. 3019). Consequently, several researchers have felt the need to broaden the concept for wider application. Cultural sociology grounded in the theory of affordances “makes visible the relationality and reflexivity in interactions between objects and people,” allowing “richer accounts of the polyvocality of objects” (McDonnell, 2023, p. 202). Still, as Tullberg (2022) brings forth, and my attempts to find recent publications suggest, the theory of affordances has not yet been extensively applied to musical instruments. This shortcoming “restrains its analytical potential to explore, describe and explain the complex ways that musicians interact with their instrument” (Tullberg, 2022, p. 03). Therefore, on the bones of the theory, Tullberg lays what he calls a musical niche, which takes into account the acoustic dimension, aesthetic value systems, institutional framings, historical background, and music’s role in society (Tullberg, 2022, p. 04), which are all inspiring angles from my research point of view. But despite promisingly listing such a multifaceted sphere of influence, Tullberg ends up calibrating his focus on musicians’ sensorimotor interaction with their instruments, whereas I wish to zoom the lens on their intricate sociocultural connotations.

Subscribing to the aforementioned sociocultural view and stretching the scope of the original theory onto culturally bound musical instruments, I argue that meaning introduces an entire world of individual viewpoints based on personal background and life experiences. Consequently, an object’s perception becomes dependent on the perceiver along with their societal, educational, and cultural status. Layers and layers of collectively agreed-upon uses and culturally variable connotations take the entire game of affordances to a whole new level, outlining a framework on how to handle, treat, relate to and feel about an object – or, more specifically, a musical instrument. These subliminal guidelines steer our preconceived expectations about how and in what context we expect an instrument to be played, what it ought to sound like, and who we anticipate seeing playing it.



The complex ways in which musical instruments are interconnected with the customs and beliefs of their originating culture is a fascinating subject. Much has been written about their value as aids for maintaining hereditary habits and as reinforcers of social identity, their role in forming a “bridge between the tangible and the intangible” (Howard, 2022, p. 41), but publications focusing explicitly on the loosening of this cultural tether are considerably more scarce. The colonial world conquest inevitably played a key role in promoting certain instruments as universal tools adaptable to any style of music. Guitar and bass, for example, are today considered neutral auxiliaries for creative innovation, while learning about their background requires diving into library archives. For the purpose of this study, a closer, not equally generic, but at least an indicative example can be found in djembe. Djembe is easily the most variably used instrument of Mande origin. Heard in African and non-African music alike, it is nowadays included in the basic percussion toolkit in many educational institutions, whereas its relatives, kora and balafon, remain more closely tied to their roots.

My own experience as a performer has reflected the issues related to affordance theory, with the perception of the balafon shifting in different circumstances and physical locations. At times a respected marker of social role rich in spirituality and tradition; other times a musical immigrant, fascinating as a curiosity, but alien all the same, its nyama – if you want to call it that – a mere wistful memory. This dichotomy may be interpreted as at least partly stemming from the ongoing controversy over cultural appropriation issues.



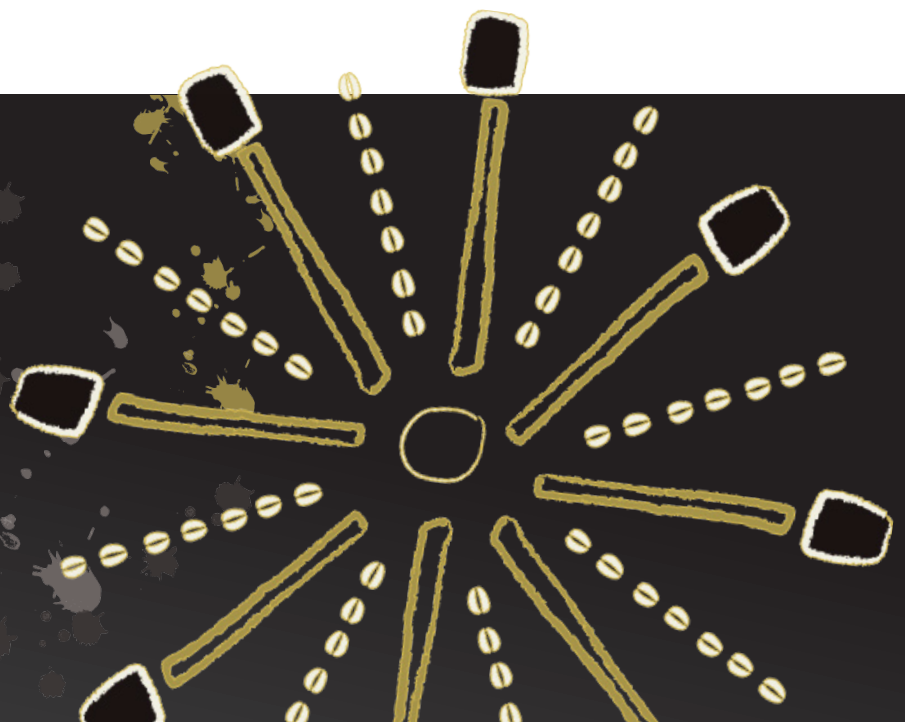
Backdrop imagery for the piece “Salava”

## Concerning appropriation

But what is it, this thing called cultural appropriation? We know that dropping the term into a conversation raises sparks, but how do we actually understand the concept? Although sometimes defined all-encompassingly as “any use of something developed in one cultural context by someone who belongs to another culture” (Young, 2008, p. 5; see also Rogers, 2006), the consensus of the day focuses on its harmful implications: cultural appropriation occurs when a dominant culture adopts elements of another culture placing them outside their original context in an exploitative, disrespectful or stereotypical way, typically at the expense of the source culture for personal gain (e.g., Lenard & Balint, 2020; Britannica, 2023).

The first written publication of the term is credited to Arthur E. Christy, dating as early as 1945 (Christy et al., 1945, p.39; Lin, 2022, p. 1). However, it was roughly around the turn of the century that the term began to rise to prominence, by 2019 garnering millions of online searches (Siems, 2019, p. 2). From the sociologists’ recommendations that cultures “should have clear and definite boundaries” (Rieff, 1970, as cited in Fosler-Lussier, 2020, p. 229), we have progressed to conclude that “instances of border-crossing or musical borrowing are more norm than exception” (Fosler-Lussier, 2020, p. 202). In the 21st century, the waves surge high. We have witnessed practitioners of various fields of art apologising for their work dating way back when what was acceptable differs from now. Examples are myriad: actors regretting their past roles (Kallioniemi & Siivikko, 2020), merchants selling but customers hesitating to purchase jewellery labelled as cultural property (Aikio, 2021), singers facing criticism for braiding their hair in cornrows (Nyman, 2021; Jackson, 2019), just to name a few.

As a rule, the debate around the topic is characterised by recrimination (Lenard & Balint, 2020; Jackson, 2019, p. 2), which is why it felt refreshing to stumble upon Kofi Agawu’s (2016) positive input. Undeniable violations aside, Agawu sees the widespread appropriation of his home continent’s cultural products as proof of Africa’s vast musical resources providing an invaluable source for intercultural creativity. Praising the resilience and adaptability of African art, he triumphantly summarises that it “may well hold the key to humanity’s musical future” (Agawu, 2016, p. 335).



My use of the balafon meets the “any object” condition of the broadest definition by Young (Young, 2008, p. 5). But stereotypical it is not, nor does it exploit intellectual property, as all my approcreations are self-composed. But, bearing in mind the aspect of cultural dominance, the thefts of Sub-Saharan cultural artefacts in the colonial past, and the ongoing effects of colonialism discussed earlier in this article, what kind of image does a musician of European complex behind a West African balafon conjure up? As far as visual expectations are concerned, Matthias Krings (2015) reports that excessive whiteness has caused even African-born artists to be dropped from festival organisers’ lists: “...white performers of African music are considered ‘wannabe’ Africans, as they do not conform to the image of the exotic other” (Krings, 2015, p. 248). Such exoticising of cultural practices is yet another form of cultural appropriation (Oh, 2024, p.31) pointing to the earlier mentioned problematic power dynamics stemming from historical injustices.

Not limited to the auditory sense only, music is also absorbed through the eyes, with subliminal preconceptions influencing our emotional reactions. As Krings points out, on multicultural stages, it is still considered preferable for the music and the musicians to represent visibly similar ethnic backgrounds. This has repeatedly proved true in my case as well. Pursuing exoticism, rather than focusing solely on the level of artistry, is damaging both by dehumanising and trivialising the artistic values of the source culture and by prioritising performers’ external appearance over the content of their art. In the coming times, we may find our attitudes shifting towards more respectful intercultural inspiration and better equality in power relations and opportunities. Or perhaps we will backtrack, digging ourselves deep into trenches of intolerance. As in this day and age, we are witnessing signs of both trends, the outcome remains to be seen.

In the meantime, the Approcreations-concert was an attempt to capture an attitudinal snapshot of this very moment in time.

## Approcreations – the concert

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“**N**ever thought one could play a solo concert with a balafon!” More than one member of the audience commented along these lines. Right they were, too, as balafon is not typically played alone. The format was chosen for several reasons: firstly, to emphasise the unconventional and secondly, to highlight the contrasting image conveyed on stage (see the previous chapter about dominance and cultural appropriation). Thirdly, for maximum impact, my aim was to create all of the sounds live with the balafon, with only minimal use of the kora as an additional instrument. Certain audio effects completely masked the original signal, and the use of other instruments would have obscured the sources of the varying sounds, thus reducing the overall ambiguity and drama.

Some of the elements represented a nod to the Mande tradition, while some introduced experimental solutions. In the spirit of oral storytelling, stories were interwoven into most pieces. Another typical feature of Mande music is to have a continuous accompaniment running throughout, while variation and cadenzas are brought in with vocal and instrumental solos. The alternating solos are considered dialogues, which is illustrated in the fact that the Mandinka language has not developed a word for playing, but rather uses the verb “fo” instead, which means “to speak”. In balafon terminology, such accompanying patterns are called kumbengos. The kumbengo structure works well with live background looping. Creative experimentation also took place in the aforementioned altering of the instruments’ sonic outcome, atypical time signatures, and open-spirited artistic solutions throughout.

Visual aspects sought to deepen the holistic sensory experience and reinforce the underlying thematics. I designed the graphic art projected on the backdrop of the stage to leave room for the imagination, with its sketchy, simplistic, less-is-more approach. Certain symbols, such as the cowrie shells, provided subtle hints of the instruments’ homelands, but overall, I did my best to avoid overly clichéd imagery. Some of the images had subtle animations embedded.

When choosing stage wear, I strive for both an artistic and respectful reference to the country and culture that have become part of who I am. This performance outfit was designed by a creative tailor in Ziguinchor, Casamance, who adapted the local clothing style to better reflect a non-native female balafon player.

**I**n the last piece, “Polokka”, a pre-rehearsed intervention took place. Its aim was to startle the audience and inspire them to give feedback. A Senegalese actor-dancer and a long-time friend, Mbacke Niang, began by showing signs of discomfort in his seat, eventually taking to the stage to confront the artist with dissatisfaction over the way their cultural symbols were being treated. The provocation broke down into dance moves to help the audience finally understand that everything was indeed pre-planned and consensual. The idea seemed to work, with reactions ranging from startled gasps to sighs of relief and laughter, presumably increasing the amount of feedback to some extent.



Approcreations – the concert took place in Helsinki Music Centre on the 10th of April 2024.

## Setlist and video clips

### Then – Now

Crystallising the overall theme of the concert, the opening piece leads us on a journey from ancient recipes to the modern era. First, the apprentice method of learning balafon accompaniments is demonstrated along with spoken narration. Then, time dashes forward, and experimental styles replace the echoes of the past. One of the first compositions for this setup presents a variable array of sound-altering tryouts.

### Kilin Fula Saba

The right hand stumbles onto the left one, as five-beat time signatures do not exist in Mande music.

### Ruusupuu | Rosewood

Good quality rosewood for balafon is getting harder and harder to find. This piece takes a stand against the overharvesting of West African rosewood.

### Salava

A storytelling atmosphere unveils the dreams of a time-forgotten willow tree sleeping in the corner of a park.

### Kuikka | Loon

Publicly voiced respect for one's parents is a much-appreciated and popular element in Mande lyrics. A song dedicated to my late mother.

### Valo ja varjo | Light and shadow

There is no joy without sadness, no light without a shadow. A  $\frac{7}{8}$  time signature, atypical in West-African tradition, reinforces the contrast.

### Samaa puuta

The poignant lyrics remind us that despite our external differences, we are all carved from the same tree. Overall, trees and forests evolved into a key theme in this concert.

### Polokka

The concert ended with a musical depiction of the internal ethical debates described in the chapter “Never alone”. Linking loosely to a dance beat once popular in Finland, Polokka apologises to the audience for the imperfections of its composer. Such vocalised humbleness is considered a respectful gesture in West African song lyrics.



## Analysing the applause

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All in all, the concert elicited favourable reactions. The overall tone of the immediate oral feedback on the spot may be described as impressed and positively surprised, the topmost reactions being amazement that one can do such things with a balafon, admiration for the versatility of the sonic outcome, and appreciation for the meticulously rehearsed entity. The images reflected on the backdrop also received praise.

Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that such a one-sided response was to be expected, as those unhappy with a recital tend to politely slip out through the side exit rather than verbalise their doubts directly to the artist. Consequently, no negative views were voiced. Only one spectator subtly remarked that despite having appreciated the effort, they still prefer the acoustic sound of these instruments. Similarly, no allegations of possible maltreatment of meaningful cultural objects were made, either by those well-versed in the secrets of the Mande or by the less knowledgeable ones. This would tentatively support my contention that the affordance of a culturally bound instrument is intrinsically linked to the context, reinforcing the importance of the social environment and the material performed. In this regard, ancient kumbengos steeped in the memories and secrets of past generations differ fundamentally from self-created melodies venturing down experimental paths.

The informal oral feedback did not suggest any notable difference between the image perceived by the audience and the performer's understanding of their artistic identity, as the attention was solely focused on musical professionalism and not, for example, ethnicity or symbolism.

To allow dissenting voices to chime in, an opportunity to provide voluntary feedback anonymously was offered to the audience present. Respondents were informed that the author may later reflect upon their expressed views as part of this research.

Considering the written contributions, one should again bear in mind their presumed bias. People attending these types of concerts are by default interested in culturally multi-sourced arts, so the map of opinions they draw is somewhat dubious in terms of credibility. Due to the unilateral nature of the feedback, it would not be ethical from a research point of view to quote individual comments here, so I resort to merely outlining their general emphasis. This parallels the overall purpose of the anonymous feedback, which is to help at least partly gauge the current climate of opinion, offer guidance for future artistic processing, and encourage reflection on inspiration vs. appropriation in performing arts.

Open-ended feedback allowed the audience to depict their thoughts unrestrictedly. Upon exploring the anonymous wordings, a form of relational qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004, pp. 15–17) was used where applicable. The relationships and frequency of the topics the audience members brought up as topmost in their minds was assessed, as well as the way they were expressed, particularly paying attention to what tone,



whether casual or concerned, they seemed to be given. This approach was applied to identify and interpret the connections between different themes in the feedback comments, focusing not only on what was said but also on how it was said.

The amount of responses and level of engagement highlights my earlier remarks concerning cultural appropriation as a research theme in terms of it being a subject that interests, stimulates, agitates, and often ignites artists and their audiences alike.

Overall, the anonymous commenters valued the influences from diverse cultures as enriching the field of music. Furthermore, mastering traditional instrument skills up to a professional level was considered possible for a non-native, as the amount of practice was deemed to outweigh the birth region. However, when considering teaching these skills to others, some contributors would prefer to be taught by a native teacher. On a larger scale, artistic freedom was recognised as a fundamental value, while emphasising that the sources of inspiration must be given due respect at all times. Familiarity with the relevant tradition and a thorough understanding of the cultural context were considered of paramount importance.

A degree of exasperation could be recognised through the lines. It may be interpreted that the finger-pointing tone often prevalent in public discourse contributed to the irritation, given that the topic tends to be volatile, provoking heated arguments (e.g., Lenard & Balint, 2020; Aikio, 2021; Kallioniemi & Siivikko, 2020; Nyman, 2021; etc.). Overall, the audience seemed very well-acquainted with the media churn. While discussing these issues was considered of primary importance, and the theme of this research praised as highly commendable, the bulk felt tired of the hyperbole.

From a researcher's standpoint, I interpret the summary of all the feedback as both encouraging and thought-provoking. The general atmosphere was very permissive, suggesting that even non-natives lacking proper ancestry may play culturally rooted instruments like the balafon and kora as long as they do so with due respect, thoroughly acquaint themselves with the tradition, and without inappropriately exploiting anyone's intellectual property. However, the volatile nature of the ongoing dispute on appropriate practices looms large in people's awareness, colouring their subconscious and initial sentiments about culturally diverse art as well.

Backdrop imagery for the piece "Samaa puuta"



## Conclusive coda

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Evaluating the findings of the Approcreations concert project, I conclude that creating approcreative art is possible, provided that it is conducted with careful consideration of the issues discussed in this article. To avoid the misuse of cultural elements and unintended crossings of critical boundaries, great sensitivity is required from the artist, who needs to have sufficiently familiarised themselves with their source of inspiration and its conventions. As the scope of this research component was not large, it does not warrant sweeping generalisations, yet certain guidelines can be fathomed.

Considering questions of cultural appropriation, the debate on the points of friction may be considered essential. With the code of good conduct changing over time, the discussion should be ongoing. However, the project findings suggest that the prejudicial attitude often prevailing in public media will not promote the cause but trigger hypersensitivity and irritability instead, potentially resulting in over-cautiousness and wariness towards art rich in intercultural inspiration.

Considering affordances, my reading is that the use of instruments integrally linked to their geocultural origins is riskier in that they may give rise to preconceived expectations about the assumed context, sonic expression, and ethnicity of the musician. Creative handling of an instrument, even one of considerable sociocultural importance like the balafon, is not forbidden, but again, cultural sensitivity and familiarity with the tradition are prerequisites. Similarly, a culturally ambiguous artistic identity will not necessarily create ambivalence on the audience's part once on stage. However, the wariness of event producers about potential audience sentiments takes on an important role in terms of whether an artist is given a platform or not. Should hesitation or rejection occur, it is more likely to happen during the artist selection processes.

This specific project thankfully ended on a positive note, as praises were generous and the response, as one-sided as it may have been, marked no offensive boundaries crossed. On the other hand, since one of the aims on the drawing board was to venture beyond the boundaries to pinpoint their exact location, this could indicate that the approach fell short of audacity, and a more maverick creativity would produce sounder results in the project's future. This would also result in the autoethnographic artist-researcher becoming increasingly more vulnerable. There is a contradiction in maintaining the illusion of art as an unpredictable, unconstrained, provocative force capable of shaking us out of our ossified mindsets while simultaneously expecting the artists to navigate the minefield of propriety etiquette without error. Should one fail, indignant disapproval quickly follows. Excessive cautiousness will not be a solution either, as art's role has always been to startle and awaken. Hopefully, an abundance of multi-sourced approcreative art will be seen alleviating tensions over time.

The balafon now having fulfilled its role as an emissary, I hope the findings prove useful for other art practitioners. We may anticipate negotiating these issues to gradually become less stressful, if for no other reason than the lack of alternatives. The ubiquitous network bursting with multicultural sonic delicacies is here to stay. Relying on the problem-solving skills of creative artists all over the world and the audiences' willingness to love art in all its diverse nuances, colours and sources, I feel confident in predicting approcreativity in the future forecast as well. ■

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### Ethical statement

The researcher has undertaken to comply with the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2023) to which the University of the Arts Helsinki / Sibelius Academy is committed. Ethical review and approval were not required for the study in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements.

Backdrop imagery for the piece "Kuikka"



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