African drumming in Australia: White men can’t drum?

Annalise Friend
African drumming in Australia: White men can't drum?

Abstract
This essay asks and attempts to address questions of identity that are raised by the practice of African drumming in Australia. These are as follows: what stereotypes are invoked in the marketing and practice of African drumming events in Australia, and do these stereotypes remain fixed in a context where participants have diverse ethnic heritage, and drum for a variety of reasons? Does the popularity of African drumming in Australia across a wide range of social and ideological groupings point to a desire to trace roots to an ultimate African homeland? Can this popularity also be read as a ‘re-embedding’ response in reaction to the disembedded aspects of a globalised, particularly urban, Australia?

This journal article is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol30/iss2/14
ANNALISE FRIEND

African Drumming in Australia: White Men Can’t Drum?

INTRODUCTION

This essay asks and attempts to address questions of identity that are raised by the practice of African drumming in Australia. These are as follows: what stereotypes are invoked in the marketing and practice of African drumming events in Australia, and do these stereotypes remain fixed in a context where participants have diverse ethnic heritage, and drum for a variety of reasons? Does the popularity of African drumming in Australia across a wide range of social and ideological groupings point to a desire to trace roots to an ultimate African homeland? Can this popularity also be read as a ‘re-embedding’ response in reaction to the disembodied aspects of a globalised, particularly urban, Australia?

By asking these questions I explore some of the complexities present in the physical act of playing in rhythm, which may appear to be a simple somatic process free from cultural politics, but its contexts — which may range from a corporate boardroom to a ‘hippie’ full moon beach gathering — suggest that issues of ownership and imitation may still be present. Complexities attach in particular to opposing stereotypes of the primitive, innately rhythmic black male drummer, and the imitative, hapless white man. Even if complicated or inverted, the power of these stereotypes remains, particularly in the marketing of drumming events and in the motivations of many participants.

I explore these questions through reflective means; that is, by describing and analysing some of my experiences as a performer and teacher of drumming, and by introducing and analysing information about who is involved in African drumming in Australia, the drums they play, where they drum, and why. This essay aims to create the beginnings of a bridge between an academic focus on identity politics and the ways that African drumming has been, and is now happening in Australia.

STEREOTYPES EXAMINED

A cliché repeated at drumming events and in their marketing material (which, like all clichés, may hold some truth) is that the somatic, experiential joy of acting in rhythm is innate to all human beings (Drumbeats online; InRhythm online; Slapsista online). This universalist idea has been linked to the fact that many of our internal physical functions are rhythmic, as well as our everyday external movements (Sachs 1953). For those with hearing, rhythm can be heard wherever there is sound, whether it is ‘natural’ or ‘manmade’. It is fair to generalise that
most music is rhythmic most of the time, and that many cultures have a tradition of drumming (Akwaaba online; InRhythm online; Soul Drummer online). More broadly, rhythm can be perceived in, and translated from, ratio, numerical sequences, and visual patterns (Sheehan 2008; Slapsista 2008). Rhythms can be read in clocks or mandalas, in binary code and in fingers tapping an essay on a keyboard.

This broad view of rhythm is often used to explain that ‘everyone has rhythm’, or ‘everyone can drum’; which is not to say that the inclination, ability, or dedication to playing a drum is equal for all participants. Yet the appeal of drumming is often precisely that it feels universal, like an activity that cuts across cultural difference through a unifying heartbeat. Yet simultaneously issues of ownership and inclusion are thrown up by the very act of playing African drums, and possibly rhythms, in places such as Australia, a context very different to their origin.

While the unifying nature of rhythm is a powerful part of the rhetoric around African drumming in Australia, at the same time, the promise of ethnic difference, or particularly the stereotype of a primitive, sexual, raw African rhythmicity is a key part of the success of the events. African drumming is undoubtedly the most popular form of hand drumming: perhaps worldwide, and definitely in Australia (InRhythm online; Pitcher online). This suggests that the stereotype of African drumming is a primal, visceral experience in contrast to much of the lives of many Westerners, and that the experience of otherness is desirable and saleable. African drumming enjoys high status in the hierarchy of both ‘world’ and ‘percussive’ music, due to marketing and the migration of key drum ‘masters’, recording artists and teachers, particularly to France and the United States from the 1950s and 60s (Charry online).

The stereotype that black people, particularly Africans, are innately, more authentically rhythmic is widespread. Like many stereotypes, opposition is at work: the exotic ‘blackness’ of drumming is invoked in opposition to another stereotype of ‘whiteness’, that being the association of whiteness with a disconnectedness from bodily experience. Or, put simply, that white men can’t drum. This may further explain the appeal of African drumming for many white participants: the Africans have something that they do not possess and that they want. Yet a paradox is present: can a supposedly ‘innate’, ethnic rhythmicity be learnt?

The stereotype of a white drummer in Australia is often that of a dreadlocked hippie, convinced he is channelling the drumming essence of Africa though generally only producing an embarrassing, woeful imitation: embarrassing for whites and woefully incapable from the perspective of
African Drumming in Australia

Africans. So while the underlying idea that ‘we all have rhythm’ is key to the popularity and rhetoric of drumming events, oppositional stereotypes are also present that reveal the tension between trying to erase cultural difference and the idea that rhythm is an ethnic inheritance.

These stereotypical black and white drummers are both male figures. Yet they are not just imaginary stereotypes: the African drummer of world music recordings and performances in Australia is overwhelmingly male. In fact, I personally have not seen or heard a female drummer of African origins on recordings or performances in Australia that I am aware of — although I have in documentary footage shot in Africa. Djembefola³ in Africa have traditionally been male, but the Amazones Women Master Drummers of Guinea are a new, radical exception to this, (see World Music Productions 2008).

The spectacle of an African drummer is linked to the clichés of black masculinity and sexual force being stronger than that of white men — which may be why the imagined figure of a white man who cannot drum invokes embarrassment: it is an emasculating sight. Phallic competition can be read in the ways that jembes are played, particularly in high-energy performance mode, strapped to the drummer and hanging between their legs. The fear that white men cannot (or should not) drum like Africans may point to an awareness of the theft of ‘others’ music and colonialism. Yet the situation is more complex than the one-way appropriation of blackness by white drummers: African drumming teachers and performers in Australia are literally in the business of selling their blackness, and their drumming, as a service or spectacle. A Guinean djembefola in traditional costume and with an oiled, black skinned body who performs a loud, fast solo to open a team building session in a corporate boardroom can be read as ‘adding value’ to the drumming ‘package’ being sold.

The competition between the African and non-African male drummers may explain why there is less participation by women as teachers, performers and facilitators of drumming in Australia. Some white male drummers may exclude women from drumming events, or especially compete with them if they feel that they have to prove something. If white men fear they may be emasculated, then the presence of skilled female drummers is likely to be perceived as an additional threat. This may explain why it takes especially confident, brave, or patient women to enter the domain of professional drumming: they are not even acknowledged in the stereotypes of the drummer and are very often played over in events. It also partly explains why some women choose to participate in women’s-only events and performance groups (see Hill 2008a online).

By reflecting on my own experience at drumming events over twelve years at many festivals, in Byron Bay, Sydney and Wollongong, the idea that rhythm is innately African which ‘white’ drummers cannot match does not bear out. While there are skilled African drummers in Australia, the marketing hype that accompanies them does not always match their proficiency, or in drumming
jargon, their ‘chops’. The idea that African men are innately better drummers does not necessarily mean that they are skilled, flexible or humble teachers (to my mind). Indeed, the ‘best’ drumming performance and teaching that I have experienced in Australia was not performed by Africans, although this is not necessarily reflected in the hype around many African performers and teachers.

Another contradictory aspect of rhetoric around drumming events is the lure of an imaginary African homeland for all humans (which, from my understanding, is still a debated proposition in biological and anthropological science). Participating in an African drumming event as a teacher, student, or performer may for some be a part of the search for human ‘roots’ in the face of what is in some ways a disembedded, globalised world.

The international spread of African drumming is a visible instance of ‘contemporary accelerated globalisation’ yet it may be that the hegemonic aspects of globalisation are catalysts for many participants to turn to drumming (Eriksen 92). The desire to be involved in an activity that is tactile and exotic and thus sets one apart from consuming mass-produced entertainment may in part be a reaction to the passive aspects of ‘cultural’ experiences accessed through television, mp3 players, the internet and gaming. In addition, African drumming in Australia is an interesting example of identification with a distant place and culture that, being directly experiential, might be understood as a bodily enactment of deterritorialised connection. This connection is imagined as spanning time as well as space, which is heard in the idea that through drumming participants are ‘going back’ to an earlier, simpler time.

As well as identifying with a far off African evolutionary birthplace, some African drumming events could be viewed paradoxically as an attempt to ‘re-embed’ participants’ sense of local habitation in Australia. This can be heard in the rhetoric that “this drum circle is what “we do”’ at, for example, North Bondi beach. It has been suggested that the ‘disembedded’ nature of much of contemporary urban life produces the reaction of ‘re-embedding’ oneself in local activities, and identifying with a local place (Eriksen 152). Disembedding may provoke for drumming participants an attraction towards the concrete (hands pounding on a goatskin), interpersonal communication (between drummers), and a local, physical occurrence.
Dreaming of travel to an exotic locale is explicitly linked to participating in African drumming locally, as reflected in the world music label Roots CD’s slogan, ‘music from the road less travelled’; or the Sydney based drumming business InRhythm being profiled as a part of a Travel feature, suggesting participants can experience something ‘of Africa’ locally (Pitcher online; Roots World online). (Here the experiencing of the ‘other’ is conveniently packaged at a local WEA course.) The axis of other-self is seemingly collapsed — the exotic can be experienced at home — yet nevertheless kept intact; the otherness of the activity is literally its selling point.

THE ‘African’ Drum

Although there are many drums, styles, and rhythms that come from Africa (not to mention dances, songs, stories and chants that may be performed alongside the drumming) the most common drumming style in Australia comes from West Africa. The most common drum is the goblet shaped jembe (or djembe — although this French spelling invokes colonialism and is therefore rejected by some), which is traditionally made with a goatskin head and wooden shell (Charry online). The jembe is said to have originated from Mali and Guinea, yet is found in all of West Africa, where it is one of the most common instruments. There is general agreement that the origin of the djembe is associated with a class of Mandinka/Susu blacksmiths known as Numu. The wide dispersion of the djembe drums throughout West Africa may be due to Numu migrations dating from the first millennium A.D. (Meinl Percussion online)

Jembes may be handmade or commercially manufactured, with those from a factory sometimes having plastic heads and/or fibreglass shells. Jembes are ideally played together with the onomatopoeically named dun dun bass drums (djun djun or dundunba);\(^7\) bells such as cowbells and agogo; and shakers such as chekere or shekere (a gourd covered with a woven mesh punctuated by seeds or beads).

Several sources indicate that jembe is the most popular hand drum in the world (Hill 2008b online; Meinl Percussion online). This is explained by the fact that it is relatively portable, inexpensive, and that it is easy to play some basic tones and rhythmic parts on it, a point made in the marketing by drumming manufacturers, teachers and performers (see, for example, InRhythm online; Soul Drummer online). However, there may be other non-pragmatic reasons for its popularity. Many drumming participants/consumers desire to own something ‘authentic’,
‘traditionally African’, and possibly ‘hand-crafted’, and the jembe is marketed as such (although some wooden shells in Australia are imported from Indonesia, not West Africa). The tactile immediacy of a hand drum made of wood and skin also appeals to many people who spend much of their time in cars, on computers, and walking on concrete.

On the one hand, the jembe is said by some to connote a community gathering as its loud high tone is used to call villages together. This aspect is often marketed as a way of bringing communities, musicians, children, or a team of workers together (InRhythm online; Rhythm Effect online; Soul Drummer online). On the other hand, the jembe may be played as a loud solo instrument, so its popularity may be due to a player’s sense of individualism: everyone wants to be heard above the group. It is true from my experience at Australian classes, retreats, performances and jams that most people (particularly before experiencing facilitation or teaching) have an approach to playing that is more self-focused than about listening to the overall group sound. This is particularly true of chai tents at folk festivals, one of the contexts where I first experienced drumming on African drums.

When properly tuned, the jembe has a very loud, machine-gun like report which makes some solos on the instrument sound like gunfire. This sound (and the accompanying ‘African’ style of playing with rapid-fire high and sharp slaps) may have developed as a way of playing ‘breaks’ and ‘calls’ — both for directing the dancers and to communicate across distance — to be heard without amplification. The intensity of this style of playing also expresses emotion and invokes trance-like states in the players or listeners. However this style, which is often accompanied with a smile tightly held, almost like a grimace by the African performer, at times seems incongruous with the generally ‘laidback’, ‘Australian’ atmosphere, particularly if it is performed by a white-skinned drummer. This is not to say that it is necessarily as simple as ‘white’ people ‘not being allowed’ to learn and perform this style; but rather that it can sound and can look noticeably ‘African’ and therefore draw attention to the performer’s ethnicity. It is also an obvious way of displaying fast rolls and tricks but in the Australian context, which is haunted by the ‘tall poppy syndrome’, this hints at the different cultural expectations of musical performance.

**Drumming Events and Performance**

There are several types of drumming events: educational (which encompasses drop-in classes, workshops, courses, and private lessons, at schools, music and community institutions, or hosted independently by the teacher); performance (for corporate events, world music festivals and venues, schools, parties, weddings, and street busking); ‘community events’ such as drum circles, often held on the full moon, particularly at beaches, and the aforementioned chai tents; for therapeutic purposes such as ‘health and wellness’ drum circles provided for special needs clients, the elderly, small children, people with a mental illness, and at health
There are a variety of contexts where drumming is a part of spiritual practice or personal development: drum and/or dance retreats, seasonal gatherings, and private rituals; at specifically ‘women’s drumming’ or ‘Goddess’ workshops and retreats; at men’s groups and retreats, where both the drumming and the groups have received harsh commentary for their unexamined ‘urge to wildness’ (see Connell 2005); and as a part of self-development or social welfare programs in prisons, detention centres, youth centres, community, migrant and health centres. Finally, drumming events may take the form of corporate team building events (conference presentations, rhythm-based team challenges, and ice-breakers); professional development sessions for teachers and drum circle ‘facilitator trainings’; and as ‘interest courses’, offered alongside yoga, craft, cooking, computer programs at community colleges.9

I have been involved in most of these types of events. Pursuing drumming has led from my jamming in the Fire Dancing club at the University of Wollongong in 1997, with very little knowledge of the drums or rhythms; to being a facilitator of corporate team building sessions at lush conference centre boardrooms; to teaching elite private school girls, and teenage boys in a juvenile detention centre. At times the sheer range of contexts is disorientating, which again speaks to the appeal of drumming and the surge in the industry in the last decade. Most of the estimated fifty drumming businesses that provide performance, teaching and facilitation at these events in Australia are under ten years old. The ideological groupings and justification for the occurrence of these events can range from a, ‘New Age’, blurrrily ‘multi-ethnic’ desire to ‘become one under the full moon’, to a very structured team building objective that likens drums to communication tools within a work place, and learning and performing drumming to performing the ‘strategic aims’ of a corporation.

Events promoted as African drumming usually involve African drums, but do not always involve teaching African rhythms. For example, the rhythms used for a team building session may not have derived from an African cultural tradition. Many bands, ensembles, orchestras, and choirs use African drums (again, particularly jembe) in genres ranging from contemporary classical to funk, afrobeat, hip hop, rock, ‘roots’, and hybrid world music. While many drumming professionals are honest about the expos.
distinctions between traditional, contemporary, and improvised rhythms, there is potential for misrepresentation and deception that a rhythm is ‘traditional’, or that a teacher or performer is a ‘master drummer’ (Dennis online).

A statement signed by African drummers generally agreed to be jembe ‘masters’ and published online in global drumming forums asks for tradition to be kept intact and respected in the midst of the jembe’s international popularity:

All the rhythms have names, a history transmitted from generation to generation, and it is necessary to know them… The djembe is not reserved only for tradition. It is a popular instrument that can harmonise with all other instruments. It is open to all. There are performances and then there is the tradition. One must not confuse them. They are completely different. (Konate online)

Yet even when attempting to distinguish between ‘performances’ and ‘tradition’, how could this be policed? Particularly worldwide? Audience and participants in African drumming events often presume that an African drummer is representing a tradition, but this assumption may actually help to create the conditions for a re-authoring of what is ‘traditional’.

The participants in African drumming events are diverse — from lesbian, feminist activists to school children; from a wide variety of workers attending a conference to prisoners and youth ‘at risk’ of dropping out of school. In my experience participation by women has increased in Australian drum circles, classes, workshops and courses. However the ‘lead drummers’ of these gatherings — those who graduate to a small ensemble or team that may teach, facilitate corporate events, and perform — are overwhelmingly male. Women are the exception. However, African dancing participants are overwhelmingly female. This suggests that participation in Australia is connected to social norms, such as women generally being more comfortable with dancing in public, and men generally being more comfortable with (or feeling more entitled to) playing a loud drum in public. Of course, this is not a one-way process: the teachers and performers and promoters of these events contribute to these trends.

Motivation

From my experience, motivating factors for those participating in African drumming events include: stress release; to experience trance; to make some noise; to express aggression; to learn about rhythm; to learn about — and perhaps respect — another culture; to connect with (and perhaps heal) the earth; to connect with a ‘community’; because their friend was going; they wanted to ‘pick up’; for social interaction; to express their inner femininity/masculinity (and God or Goddess); to be the best; to add to their repertoire as a percussionist or drum kit player; because it’s the team building activity at the conference that year; or that ambiguous Australian phrase, ‘it’s something different’. Some people may be aware of African drumming traditions, and the possible complexities of them learning African drumming in Australia. For others, the ‘personal development’ motivations are primary.
For many participants a key motivation is a desire for real, somatic invigoration, as described by one of the key drummers to bring African drumming to the West, Babatunde Olatunji: ‘The sound of the drum resonates an inner chord that vibrates through your whole body, so that when you go through the act of drumming you are energising every cell in your body’ (Soul Drummer online). This ‘energised’ state, or the ‘drummer’s high’ may be witnessed even in those watching drumming: for example, whenever there is a drum kit solo in a performance, the audience often lets loose their most enthusiastic cheering at the immediate suggestion of unadulterated drumming. In the case of participating in a drum circle, the mutual immersion in rhythmic sound and action may indeed create a feeling of closeness with a range of people. Drummers may ‘talk’ to each other on their drums, without a language barrier. Learning a rhythm together in a class can be like learning a physical language that can bring relief to the anxieties of urban living. At the same time, the pathways that brought African drumming to Australia and the ways it has become an industry, have political implications and can be contentious.

Some non-African drumming teachers/performers/facilitators skirt the racial stereotypes invoked in drumming and instead build their style and ‘image’ around ingenuity, originality and musical themes. A prominent example is Greg Sheehan, a formidably creative percussionist, and teacher of mine. He has devised and taught innovative approaches to rhythm that use, amongst other sources, sequences of numbers and geometric patterns. He is aware of a wide range of world rhythm cultures and practices, yet may arguably be propagating a genuine Australian drumming style due to his unofficial mentorship of many musicians (Sheehan 2008). Other musicians may also draw on and respond to a range of contemporary and world music in their percussion: they could also be said to be developing a ‘glocal’ style (see Aurora Percussion online; Loucataris 2008a online; The Rhythm Hunters online).

Conclusion

African drumming events in Australia both draw on and stir up the idea that rhythm is universal. Yet the commercial and ‘community building’ enterprise of African drumming in Australia also trades in stereotypes, particularly masculine blackness and whiteness, which contradicts the desire for connection across cultural and ethnic boundaries. The diverse range of contexts in which African drums and/or rhythms may be played in Australia, and by whom, speaks of a wide
variety of motivating factors and levels of knowledge about African rhythmic ‘tradition’. There is potential for misrepresentation of what is traditional and what is ‘contemporary’. Yet the popularity of the jembe means that completely policing who plays what is unrealistic. So too, is knowing the truth of whether ultimately, ‘everyone has rhythm’. It is certainly true from my experience that drumming can be an invigorating, unique way to communicate to others without the need for speaking. Drumming is a visceral experience that is unusual in a somewhat disembedded, globalised Australia, and an activity that calls into question the complex consequences of globalising processes.

NOTES
1 Disembeddedness is understood by Erikson as a general ‘movement from the concrete to the abstract, from the interpersonal to the institutional and from the local to the global’ (Eriksen 280).
2 Ubaka Hill should be mentioned. An African-American drumming teacher and performer who visits Australia, she is firmly focused on ‘women’s drumming’ and women-only events.
3 Literally translated djembefola is ‘one who gives the djembe voice’. It is the traditional Malinke name for a djembe player (Djembefola online).
4 Janine Rew is a notable exception (Afrobeat online).
5 It has been pointed out to me that some of these teachers may have undergone intense training regimes in African national ballets, and in any case their experiences of teaching and learning may differ widely from my expectations (Loucataris, M. 2008b, personal communication).
6 My subjective criterion for ‘best’ includes: unique ‘feel’, proficiency, musicality, listening, and composing or improvising agility.
7 A full set of dundun consists of three barrel-shaped drums of different sizes: the smallest and highest is the kenkeni, the next biggest is the sangban and the bass drum is the doundounba. They may also collectively be called dun dun (or it seems, in Australia at least, as dun duns). A bell is often attached to them, to be played with one stick, the drum with the other.
8 Chai tents are named after the spiced Indian tea and are synonymous with ‘hippies’ and all night, all day drumming.
9 In practice many of the event types overlap. For example workshops may include rhetoric about community building; many of the same people may attend many different events; and moments of more obvious ‘performance’ may arise at a non-performance event.

WORKS CITED


——— 2008b, personal communication.


Rhythm Effect 2008, ‘Team Building, Leadership, Conferences and Innovation in


