



Review of Michelle Kisliuk, *Seize the Dance: BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance*.

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[1] *Seize the Dance* is an ethnographic study of performance (viewed as a complex of expressive forms including music, dance, and text) among the BaAka people, one of the many groups of the African equatorial rainforest zone that are awkwardly referred to by outsiders as “pygmies.” Reviews of this sort of study probably appear infrequently in this journal, and I must confess at the outset some trepidation in presenting this monograph to music theorists. Kisliuk simply does not emphasize BaAka musical structure (she describes and transcribes musical performances or parts thereof, but this is done in a fragmented fashion throughout much of the book), nor does she attempt (and for good reason) to articulate norms or rules of performance practice that would help a newcomer to this music conceptualize the generative processes in play during performance. Rather, she treats music as one form of expressive culture that is combined with others in performance events, of which there are many types. The author focuses primarily on “reading” these performance events, i.e., interpreting community dynamics within these events and also interpreting BaAka adaptations/responses to their changing world. Kisliuk thus is a “music theorist,” if one is willing to define the term broadly. She “beholds” the BaAka and their music, and relates to us the experience of seeking understanding.

[2] Perhaps the most striking feature of this ethnography is the manner in which it is conceived and written. The author describes her work as an example of “socioesthetics” in which she emphasizes “the elements of experience and interaction, leaving room for choice, irony, contradiction, and surprise” (page 12). She contrasts her approach to that of “ethnoesthetics,” which seeks to articulate underlying coherence systems of a circumscribed “people” often by conveniently underestimating “the particulars of time and place, the variability of social situations, the possibility of internal contradictions, and the immediate, multiplex consequences of power politics” (page 12). Largely, this study boils down to a narrative presentation that takes the reader through the writer’s own experiencing of her encounters with her subjects and her ongoing attempts to interpret and understand those experiences. As a result, the reader reads about the writer’s experiences in roughly the diachronic order in which they took place, and learns much personal detail about the author’s confrontations with the challenges of fieldwork (health, bureaucratic, interpersonal, logistical) on someone else’s turf. Perhaps nowhere is the nature of this approach more dramatically illustrated than when the author shares with her readers poems she wrote in response to her experiences—one to express the complexity of what she was encountering in the field (pages 44–45), the other in response to the murder of an anonymous fellow cab passenger during a bandit attack (pages 171–172). Thus, one should not expect while reading this book to be presented with reductive representations of BaAka culture (“the pygmies do this,” “the dance represents that,” “the performance is structured thus”). Rather, one is carried along by the author as she grapples with the perplexing events she encounters.

[3] The centrality of experience in the author's approach is reflected in the structure of the book itself. Topics (be they types of dances or issues such as modernization and missionization) are introduced not within an overriding taxonomic logic, but in the order in which they came to occupy the author's attention while in the field. Chapter titles allude to issues (life in an African forest; the politics of gender; missionaries and modernity) or to specific categories of performance (elamba; mabo; women's dances) as these issues and forms came to the fore of the author's unfolding experience. Thus, a reader carrying into their reading of this book the expectation of finding chapters focusing on instruments, tonal organization, vocal technique, drumming, compositional practice, contexts of performance, musicians, and so forth will most certainly be frustrated with this work in large part because the author does not set out to describe BaAka musical performance in such terms. She is much more interested in introducing the reader to real life individuals and communities, and explaining how she came to understand THEM in large part through their interactions during performance events. Understanding the MUSIC as a logical system in itself is not, in my opinion, a major priority of the author in this work.

[4] That said, I hasten to add that the author does deal with musical structure and performance practice to a small degree. Sprinkled throughout the text are nearly two dozen notated musical examples of performances that are included on two accompanying compact discs. But these notations are not full transcriptions of performances or even segments of performances. Rather, they typically serve as mini-inventories of some, but not all, of the basic rhythmic and melodic ideas that appear in a performance. This approach to musical representation selected by the author makes sense given the nature of the music itself; performances of "pieces" are unbelievably organic and anything but predetermined. Individuals phase in and out of a performance and repeat, vary, or abandon a given melodic idea seemingly at will. There appears to be no definitive musical essence for a given piece that will always be present in at least part of every performance of it. Thus, for me, this work provides little in the way of elucidating how a BaAka or other pygmy community can come together and create, in a remarkably spontaneous and sustained fashion, very elaborate polyphonic structures. If anyone could explain the workings of this music to me, it is probably Kisliuk. However, as I have already mentioned, the thrust of her study is in other directions and I and others will have to continue to enjoy our disembodied encounters with this fascinating music without much of a clue as to what makes it tick musically.

[5] The music captured on the two accompanying compact discs is presented, I feel, mainly to allow the reader to share in some small and mono-dimensional way the performances experienced live by the author. References to the recordings in the text are numerous, but the author does not expend much space and energy describing the recordings. In regard to their content, the recordings are fascinating and include many remarkable moments of music making. With the exception of two commercially recorded selections of non-pygmy popular music, the recordings are in situ documents of performance events that start and stop unexpectedly and that include some extraneous sounds. They are meant to capture the ambiance of the performance events themselves, not to produce well balanced, carefully controlled recordings that are technically clean and commercially viable. The author, on occasion, even carried her recorder and microphone into the dance line, capturing what she heard from her perspective as a participant.

[6] So what is it that one learns from this book? Perhaps most importantly, one can gain a more realistic understanding of the complexity of BaAka existence. The book helps one challenge the romanticized image of pygmies as forest dwellers leading a seemingly idealistic existence in egalitarian communities, singing as they hunt and gather the rainforest's bounty. The true picture is far more complicated. Most pygmies have extensive and complex relationships with Bantu-speaking peoples (who they call milo) who live on the edge of the rainforests. Many pygmies spend part of the year outside the forest practicing sedentary agriculture or working wage-earning jobs. National governments place varying degrees of pressure on their pygmy population to integrate into mainstream national culture. Several missionary organizations have aggressive programs to convert pygmies to Christianity. These forces, and others, contribute to a continuously evolving BaAka identity. And one way of grasping this evolving identity is to study and contemplate BaAka expressive/performative culture. Kisliuk, rather than finding evidence to support the romantic stereotypes of pygmy culture held by Westerners, reveals through her study of and initiation into particular BaAka performance forms "the particulars of time and place, the variability of social situations, the possibility of internal contradictions, and the immediate, multiplex consequences of power politics" (page 12) that are part of contemporary BaAka existence. I came away from this book with a considerably more informed understanding of BaAka performance as a revealing mode of social interaction through which to grasp the realities of pygmy culture at this point in time.

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