

(Excerpt taken from *Sweetness, Time and Money: Embodying Manding Jali Music*, forthcoming book by Dr. Lisa Feder, 2020 lisa@lisafeder.com. All rights reserved 2020)

CHAPTER SIX

JALI TIME IN NEW YORK CITY

Embodying Time

Every culture has its own sense of time. There are the rhythms of the day, week, and year that are culturally specific. For example, in Israel the first day of the work-week is on Sunday, when the banks open. In West Africa people tend to eat the largest meal at 2 pm. In France, the lunch break happens between 12-2 when many eat a hot lunch and services may stop. In New York, lunch and dinner times are less standard and business continues as usual.¹ Living in West Africa, I also learned that people spend their time on human relations as we saw in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I focus on the specialized training I receive in moving “in jali time.” There is a relationship between musical time and social time in ways that become apparent the longer I spend time with my teacher, Famoro Dioubate. I also discuss that these nuances in learning culture through music happen when one submits to an apprenticeship with the teacher, something quite unfamiliar to the American and European pay-for-time lessons.

Clearly, time is essential for all musicians; in jaliya the time in music is metaphoric for the time in life. Time is the moral guideline. The great teacher. How we spend our time throughout our day, and the speed at which we act, demonstrates our wisdom and social etiquette in Manding culture. And jalis are the masters at controlling and playing with the time in music and in life. The ways in which they manipulate

¹ See Lefebvre, Henri “Rhythmanalysis: space and time in everyday life.” 1992.

melodies over rhythms raises our consciousness to the finesse of time. If we are willing to listen closely, or better yet, learn to play these rhythms, we are training in being graceful with time and society. We have already seen in the Balafon Workshops (Chapter 4) that the timing in Manding music is different than the timing in American and European music. Embodying a new sense of time in learning balafon music, we are transformed to a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting in life. Like yoga, when you practice correctly it is possible to transfer the lessons and training into other areas of life.²

Lessons with Jali Famoro Dioubaté

When I show up to Famoro's house for my lesson, I am out of breath from running from the subway to the streets, and up the four flights of stairs. Why am I running? Famoro is not going anywhere, but I told him I would be there at 5PM. He is *always* late, knowingly and without shame. But my culture has pressed into me that being punctual is smart. So when I want Famoro to show up somewhere at 8 pm, I tell him 6:30.

Famoro walks slowly from the front door back to the couch where he sits. He is medium height, has a robust build, a big round face, and deep, black, almond-shaped eyes. He goes to the local gym every morning to stay in shape. Jogging, lifting, stretching, he says it keeps him sane. By the time we met in 2006 he had already been living in the States for seven years. He has never been back to Africa since.

Famoro has traveled the world playing the balafon. He first traveled to Abijan, then to Europe where he lived in Marseille, France. He traveled as far as Fiji and

² See Gregory Downey on Learning Capoeira. He also speaks of the embodied practice changing his approach to life.

Australia where he almost stayed, but a friend brought him to New York in 1999 and he hasn't left since then. He lives in a two-bedroom apartment in Harlem, upper Manhattan, the second bedroom is rented to a friend.

Apprenticeship

To learn balafon music, one can become a student who pays a set amount of money for an hour of lessons. Famoro charges about \$50 per hour. However to learn *jaliya*, one inevitably finds oneself in the role of apprentice to a master. There is no set price once one has entered into apprenticeship, and no way to properly learn *jaliya* but from direct transmission from master to student, *in situ*. The most important lessons often come in extra-musical contexts. And this takes time. Already, for this American, fixed ideas about money rates and corresponding times are tossed in the wind, and there is no solid ground anymore.

The master-apprentice relation has been long forgotten in most Western cultures. In Eastern-style cultures, apprenticeship exists such as in the spiritual realm where, for example, monks and nuns support their gurus. In West Africa, apprenticeship still exists as one of the standard forms of home-grown education, generally in the form of skills passed down through family lines. This kind of education stands in parallel to the colonially established English or French school system. If one wants to learn a certain set of skills such as blacksmithing, car repairing, or *jaliya*, one becomes an apprentice to a master. The apprentice serves or assists the master all day, every day, and in doing so, he learns the necessary skills involved in the trade. These skills include the stories from past experiences and other knowledge that reveal how to treat the customer, how to conduct

oneself properly, how to care for the tools, and other manners of propriety and etiquette in which the values of society are embedded. Many of the youth today do not take the time to do apprenticeships. Society is changing, slowly, and the elders complain that the youth are not holding onto the traditions of their ancestors. Recall in Chapter Two in Borabá, the Gambia, as we listened to Basiro play kora under the night sky *en famille*, Bakary expressed concern that “we no longer tell these stories to our children anymore.”

Curiously, it is happening now that European and American students are apprenticing to West African musicians such as jalis who are living in foreign cities such as New York and Paris. The essence stays the same, but the particularities can change. In West Africa, the apprentice might run ahead and set up the balafon, he might fix loose parts, keep the balafon clean, and fetch water and food for his master. He observes how the master serves as master of ceremony, how he talks to family members, how he, perhaps, avoids unnecessary socializing. In the United States, servitude might also include finding the jali gigs, driving the jali to gigs, and taking care of things bureaucratic in the foreign language. Sometimes it requires expending some money on the jali’s behalf. But most of all, it takes commitment of time.

Taking Time

In order to learn balafon with Famoro, you must *take time*. You have to show up at his house and hang out, let the relationship warm up, let Famoro and your vibe click into a groove. This might mean spending a few hours watching the soccer match first, or eating a meal together. Or having a very slow and sporadic conversation about how things are in life, the real meat of the interaction, only to be revealed after spending a few

hours time. Then, maybe, you will play balafon. Or maybe you won't. Either way, you are learning jali time. It is trying for someone like me, born in midtown Manhattan on the longest day of the year, to embody Famoro's time. I exude energy. But over time, Famoro slowed me down, and I would learn how to be more patient, to wait for the right time to speak and act. These lessons in good timing became necessary for me to progress in learning the music.

When I arrive Famoro is sitting calmly on the couch, and only one balafon is perched between two chairs. This is not the 'workshop' format that I am used to. We chit chat a few minutes, and then sit in silence. The TV is showing a soccer match, no volume. I am anxious to learn, and after about ten minutes, and not sure what is happening, I move over to the balafon and play pattern one to Soli, then pattern two. Famoro keeps watching the screen. He does not move. When I stop, there is more silence. I don't know what to expect. He is not "take charge" like Abou, and this is not a balafon workshop, so I decide to wait, politely. I watch the screen too. The soccer match pauses for a commercial. At that point Famoro looks up. He starts to sing pattern two and clap his hands to the beat. Suddenly the lesson has begun. I straighten up and pay attention. I watch him clapping while singing. I realize he is showing me where the downbeat is located in the song, the one that we always faked in Abou's workshop because we didn't understand the timing. Well, baby, here it is. "Be ready!"³

I concentrate hard on his hands and listen to his voice. I hear the last two claps line up with notes in the second pattern. I think I'm making some headway, but I consistently sing it back to Famoro wrong. He tells me, "relax, just feel it in your body." Yes, I think to myself, *I am overthinking*. Embodied learning is a must in this culture.

³ This is a direct quote off of Missia Saran's album, Famoro's wife. "Be ready! I'm coming!"

But still, I cannot tell if his first two claps of pattern two come one third, one half, or two thirds after the first beat of the pattern and I'm back in my head again, trying to intellectualize it. My culturally-programmed way of organizing melody over rhythm keep interfering.

Time and Tonality

At this point some technical explanation between time and tonality may be helpful. The theory of tonality induction in music explains that when we listen to a series of notes we determine which ones form the structures and which ones form the embellishing notes. Our ways of doing this are somewhat a matter of cultural sensibility. It tells us how we identify the key of a song, how we locate the tonal center for a tone sequence, and how we group notes into meaningful categories (Gjerdingen 2000). Tonality induction is affected by initial placement of melodies over rhythms, orientation to upbeats, and gaps between notes such that unexpected starts to songs can throw off a listener's ability to categorize and form structures correctly. Jali balafon music intentionally plays with our sense of tonality induction. The second melodic line in a song like *Soli* is syncopated to the downbeat and to the primary melody. We want to adjust for the syncopation by aligning melody one and two in the same place when in fact melody two echoes melody one.

Respect the Time

I am considering this phenomenon in West African music when Famoro breaks my train of thought. He puts his hand into a half-prayer in front of his forehead to

indicate where the time is in his body, his fingertips pointing skyward. “You have to respect the time.” I sense there is something holy about this message. He is drawing a connection between his body, mind, and the heavens above.

I struggled to learn the time in Solí, and admittedly, I recorded Famoro and went home to study by myself. Rather than learning through embodiment, I mapped out the notes in timing to intellectually understand it, then I taught myself how to play it. When I return to Famoro’s I start singing and clapping pattern two. “Yeah, you got it,” he tells me, “but it is not solid.” I haven’t embodied the *feeling* yet. To embody means that you *feel* where the notes are placed in relation to the downbeat, even, especially, when they are syncopated. The written formula is only a crutch, and a good one, but it doesn’t take me to the final destination, the embodiment of the rhythm which gives me a more complete understanding.

We move to the balafon. I play pattern two. Famoro improvises, weaving melodic excerpts in and out. Sometimes these improvised pieces line up with the downbeat, sometimes they play off the syncopated beat.⁴ It requires intense concentration for me to not fall off-kilter and get pulled by Famoro’s improvisations. He is training my mind to be strong to not get pulled onto his rhythm. By playing with him, he is training me to embody the rhythm.

Many years later, in December 2018, I watch Famoro teaching an advanced apprentice, David, the same lesson that he had taught me. David is learning the rhythms on guitar while Famoro plays balafon. First Famoro implores David to respect the time. He put his hand in front of his forehead in the “holy prayer” indicating respect. I

⁴ An American Jazz guitarist friend of mine, Mark Sganga, was duly impressed that Famoro could manage to improvise off of the syncopated melody with such ease and finesse. For Mark, this proved a mastery to an aesthetic that we just do not do in Western music.

understand David's dilemma; it isn't a lack of respect for the time, which in David's culture's music, he knows very well. It is his (our) conditioning of tonality induction laid over syncopated rhythms that confuse us. Still, Famoro's instructions are correct, we must learn to respect the time in this syncopated melody, and that comes through a feeling in the body.

To teach David to embody the rhythm Famoro makes us stand up and slap our legs, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3. *Feel* the rhythm. Relax. Relatively easily. Then Famoro sits and David tries to play the pattern again. Famoro is swinging and moving his body to the music to show him the feeling. Then he tries singing the chorus over the music to show him the feeling. But of course, the moment the tones are added back in, the *American* way of aligning the melody in a 1-2-3-4 fashion, our inculcated tonality induction, interferes again. David slowly re-learns how to hear the melody according to the new rhythmic alignment, but it takes more time than we might think. The troubles we have in feeling the time in a 6/8 time signature undoubtedly baffles the jali teachers who exercise great patience in our slow learning process.

Respect comes up again when David loses the rhythmic placement and aligns to the (wrong) downbeat. Famoro shakes his head. David stops playing. David does not understand yet how to come back in the right place so he just starts playing where he thinks it should go and waits for Famoro to realign the secondary pattern to *him*.

Famoro stops the playing and explains, "If you miss the rhythm, you have to stop and wait and come back in to *my* pattern in the right place. I don't come in to *your* pattern. What happens if we are playing in front of people? The people have to follow me, because I am consistent (the master). I cannot change myself to align with you. That

is respect!” He says it clearly. The respect of our elders, or your master when you are an apprentice, becomes an intrinsic part of our musical lessons, and consequently of learning Manding values.

Relaxing

As I play, my shoulders are half way up to my ears and my wrists are rigid. I start to become fatigued and Famoro notices my body posture. “Hey,” he says as we play, “relax your body. Don’t be tight.” I think that I can hold the rhythm together somehow in the rigidity of my body, just like in life, when I am trying too hard. Perhaps I don’t realize that my tone in speaking, or playing, emits this rigidity. There is a necessary balance: not too relaxed, not too rigid. I never err on the side of the relaxation. I am not graceful in playing yet.

The lesson is recalled to me in 2018. David is rehearsing pattern two on his guitar again and again, working out the notes. He is rushing, playing speedily as he gets better and better at it.

Famoro stops him. “Relax,” he says. “This rhythm, we never play it that fast. It’s a feeling, a groove, to make people feel happy, easy.” Famoro plays the rhythm on his balafon and it is, indeed, sweet and easy, relaxing. “People gonna feel your feeling. You gotta be relaxed.” David tries again and this time he is much more mindful, easy-going. “Yeah, yeah,” we urge him on, swaying our bodies to match the swing.

A Birdseye View

Back in 2006, Famoro starts fine-tuning other aspects of my playing. “Your left hand is

slow. Listen.” I start to listen to my left hand. What was I listening to before? Perhaps I was focusing on my right hand, which does a lot more of the work in this pattern. I tune in to my left hand and see how it is sloppy. I feel how the left hand melody relates to the beat and I start to click it into place, to give it feeling by paying attention to the subtle space between the notes I touch and the downbeat. The piece is sounding better now.

I learn that I can focus on my left hand rhythm, my right hand rhythm, or the two, together as one rhythm. I learn that the attention I pay to the time of either hand, my bodily posture, my attention to *all of* the notes makes a difference; everything clicks into a neat balance when the music sounds good. I see a bigger picture, more possibilities.

Next I am playing *Minuit*. The right hand plays only two alternating notes while the left hand is quite active. The right hand is on automatic pilot and it seems to be fine. But today, Famoro wants to teach my right hand “independence.” He teaches me a more intricate new pattern on my right hand that interacts with the pattern on my left hand. A whole new realm of challenges explode in my brain. The way I focus my mind shifts to take on a much bigger perspective, as if I just zoomed out and can see a bird’s eye view.

I admit that ten years later I am still learning independence of left and right hand when playing. While I have smoothed the earlier parts of my playing, I am still very clumsy and ungraceful with this stage of independence between left and right hands.

To me, this lesson maps out into extra-musical life situations. Imagine you have your perspective on a situation, and you see it from your view. You know other views exist, but you are focused on your view. Suddenly, someone you care about starts to tell you the details of their perspective on the situation. You now have a much broader view of the reality. The balafon teaches me that. But alas, in real life and on the balafon, I am

no expert in seeing the greater whole. I need more practice to have good insight in this area.

Asking Questions

Sometimes I ask Famoro a question and he just simply does not respond. I used to repeat the question, but it was futile. I learned to ask and let it go. If the answer is for me to know, it will come. Sometimes a few hours later the answer will come in an unexpected form. I ask Famoro about this and he explains, “The mood, the spirit, the way I am when you ask the question, it is not in my head at that time. Later your question is going to get in my head, and then the answer comes some other way.” Inspiration cannot be forced. This is important. Famoro is not going to answer me until the answer comes to him quite naturally. *This is a spiritual way of life*, I think to myself. We tend to force time and answers in my world.

Asking questions also becomes an exercise in reading and feeling the right time to ask, the right way to phrase it. Sometimes it means not phrasing the question at all, but merely intending to know. And the answer, if the question is correct, will inevitably come. In part, this requires not only reading the jali, but reading oneself. One has to develop a realistic awareness of where one is in the learning process. Sometimes I ask Famoro a question and he responds with, “Why do you want to know?” This used to stump me. Now it challenges me to think sincerely about the reason. Sometimes, if I take my time, it comes, embedded in a web of understanding. Sometimes, it is a shallow question, and it goes unanswered. When it is insightful, Famoro laughs, tells me the answer, and tells me to go write it down in my notebook.

I start to catch on to what makes the “wrong” question. We, the apprentices, often ask Famoro the name of a song, and often he doesn’t tell us what it is. It has happened to me that Famoro is playing and after he finishes I try to guess which song it is. I’m usually wrong. He does not give the answer easily. He wants me to learn how to hear the song, the qualities of the song. In 2018, I watch Famoro teaching David a new song. At some point, David, who is practicing and repeating a pattern again and again, asks the inevitable question: “What song is this?” Famoro responds, “Why do you want to know?” I enjoy hearing David learn the same lesson as me. For Americans, the answer seems obvious. Not so in this culture. Famoro is helping us to cultivate wisdom.

Famoro evades the question and engages David in the music again. Later, David asks again, and again Famoro evades the question. It is intentional, of course, and I devise a theory that Famoro won’t tell David until he understands better how the song should be played. Perhaps this is West African wisdom: you don’t learn the name of the song until you know how to properly play it. But I’m not entirely sure what motivates Famoro to tell or not tell us at any given question.

Playing with feeling

One day I sit down to play *Lamban*. I practice moving back and forth between patterns two and three, three and two, two and three, three and two. I iron it out. Then I’m playing pattern three, a lovely groove, but my hands are just not graceful. I can hear how to it should sound, but I cannot produce it. Famoro tells me, “you have to give it feeling.” This is no longer a matter of understanding the timing which I have already embodied, this is something else.

Famoro pulls his balafon out from a line-up of balafons stacked against the wall behind the couch. He does so with care, with respect. His actions are precise, not exaggerated. He merely watches what he is doing and makes his motions precisely appropriate to the weight and delicacy of gourds and keys. He places it onto the stand. He is *mindful*, graceful, and loving with the balafon. I admire even this small gesture. When I carry the balafon I am overly mindful and still, I may hit the end on a door or wall. I am a novice. He demonstrates *Lamban* by playing my part as smooth as butter. Again, any mental effort is for naught. He tells me you have to feel it in your heart. And practice.

When Famoro plays balafon, each note is thoughtful, each strike has the precise strength he wants it to have, and it is deliberately placed with intention. It is no different than playing the piano with emotion. Someone who gets all the nuances right is merely an expert. A master distinguishes himself from others in the attention and love he puts into playing every single note, every single moment that unfolds. When he plays for me, the grace, love, and attention that Famoro puts into each note is transmitted to me through the soundwaves in the moment-to-moment unfolding, almost like a caress. Indeed, the soundwaves are touching us. I recall a lesson that my drum teacher in Ithaca, New York had taught me about feeling the music through your heart, and now I realize that the feeling is imbued to the listener. Again, this is not just a jali thing, this is true of all good musicians. This is where the written and the oral music meet- in the performance.

These nuances are not generally verbalized, and the attempts to do so can never depict the true feeling anyhow. They are what make up the magic in the music that makes us want to participate. The Mande feeling, the subtle tensions between notes, which ethnomusicologists Keil and Feld called ‘participatory discrepancies’ can only be

understood in the act of playing them (Feld and Keil 1994: 55). They provide the meaning behind the music. In their description, if the participatory discrepancies are missing, these subtle tensions in microtiming and microtuning, then “the *orishas* will not descend” and the “polka dancers will sit tight” (Ibid. 108). The *orishas* are the Brazilian gods, a syncretic mix of Christian saints and African polytheistic gods that Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian practitioners channel when the rhythm is just right. For jaliya, this subtle timing is the key to motivating a community of people toward the greater communal good. Everyone knows the music and the musician’s ability to play it well unites them in a common feeling.

Mental Agility

Over the years, I’ve learned so many patterns now to so many songs. There is *Yankadee*, and *Yabolo*, *Minuit*, *Kaira*, and *Solí*, *Tara*, *Duerte*, *Lamban*, *Kinsanfaré*, and more. I am still learning how to learn. I no longer write anything down although I do record parts on my phone so I can play them back later. Each pattern requires the necessary steps: the breaking down and committing to muscle memory, the time in each pattern, and how other accompanying patterns relate. Every song I learn constitutes an exercise in mental agility. Can I get used to this sequencing of patterns? And this one? And this one? There are endless reasons why each pattern poses new challenges for the brain. The left hand has to move quickly between two notes, or the timing starts on the second partial of a triplet, or the melody is syncopated, among others. All in all, learning to play balafon teaches me how to reorient myself again and again to a new situation, and then to play it with a relaxed body, with heartfelt emotion, with attention and care. It is an

intensive training in how to be centered, calm, relaxed, and appropriate to each new unfolding event that occurs in life. It reminds me of my yoga practice. Ancient wisdoms.

Grace

Learning balafon is an exercise in human grace, a theme I alluded to in the introduction and a concept I apply from Gregory Bateson's first application of it in his chapter on "Primitive Art" (Bateson 1979). In brief, Bateson insists that the sublimation of strictly rational mind is necessary for the survival of humankind. Purely rational mind leads to individual greed, accumulation of power and will ultimately result in a 'Tragedy of the Commons' type scenario. In order to see a bigger picture, the long-term, one has to take a step back and allow space for the un-thought of to present itself. This is consequently also the recipe for being graceful in music. If one is too concentrated on getting the notes right, the feeling is not there.

Bateson describes that the practice of art is an exercise in balancing the "reasons of the heart" with "reasons of reason," which approaches the perfection of the grace that exists in nature. Furthermore, the grace (in nature, or the successful achievement of grace in art) is recognizable cross-culturally. If we can recognize the grace in a murmuration of starlings moving in unison in a perpetually moving cloud, or the grace in the movements of a galloping horse, then we can equally recognize the grace in human movement such as in dance, or music, or in representational art like a painting, no matter the culture. This meta-message, Bateson calls it a 'code,' is understandable by anyone. The message however—what the art means—is culturally-specific.

When we practice balafon or yoga, or traditional dance, or painting, or

calligraphy, and many more, we must practice the skills in the same way I learn patterns on the balafon before we can imbue it with graceful motion, or feeling. We are learning to be graceful on a humanly universal level despite any culturally-specific meaning we may have. For me, learning a foreign culture through the graceful embodiment of an art is an ideal way to establish relations because it unites people in a form of meta-communication without confusing them with rational, verbal, ideological messages. We, the apprentices, learn much about the quality and nature of human relationships when we learn through art, through tacit knowledge, through embodiment. And by doing so, our bodies, ourselves, are *transformed*.

Time Out

The call to prayer rings out over Famoro's phone. No one jumps too quickly. They finish the lesson they are doing and then Famoro, then his apprentice, Uasuf, take turns doing ablution in the bathroom. Famoro has thrown a robe over his clothing. I know not to physically touch him now, and to talk minimally if at all. He rolls out a prayer rug diagonally across the living room floor. Uasuf rolls out his rug along side of Famoro and they stand at the foot of their rugs, saying a prayer, then they bend over, kneel down, and touch foreheads to the floor. This repeats several times. I used to just sit quietly at the table, but I have started to use this prayer time for my own prayer. Now I sit on the floor behind them in meditation style, taking the time to be present to my moment-to-moment awareness of the breath, perhaps to cultivate loving-kindness, to continually let the passing thoughts in my mind drift out of my mind as well, to embody a quiet, peaceful, larger presence. When we finish, Famoro says, may be all be healthy and happy and

protected by God. *Amin*. This moment of silence is a recalibration, a pause from the goings on, a clearing of the head and heart. When we return to our lessons, we are a little more alert, a little more peaceful, perhaps a little clearer. We shared prayer time and somehow it matters. Even more, their Islam and my Buddhist influence practices are so close to the same.

I also acknowledge and incorporate time-outs in my methodology of doing and teaching ethnography. In our Fieldschool for Ethnographic Sensibility, a program I developed in Belgrade Serbia (2015), the co-founder and I offered students a time to lie on the floor and meditate several times a week. Many students were grateful that we created this space for them. Studying and living abroad, a time when we shake up habitual patterns and learn to embody new ones can be exhausting and overwhelming. Leaving a dedicate time and space to do nothing is essential to integrate the new information and to give the mind and body time to rest and refuel.

No one has *ever* tried to convince me to convert to Islam, or that my way of praying is any less than theirs. These moments are mutually shared times of peace and quiet, and can be respected by people of any spiritual practice, or none at all.

Humble Tricksters

Jalis use notes intentionally to play catchy melodies off of one another. The art has developed as a method, or technology, to trick the ear or the mind, into thinking the time is one place when it is another. Jalis are tricksters.⁵ When you listen carefully and

⁵ Steve Pond highlights some of these reasons in his analysis of Herbie Hancock's album, *Headhunters*. Throughout Africa and the Diaspora, certain similar characteristics surface again and again, and usually relate to music and word games, often characterized by multiple, syncopated rhythmic or melodic lines and double entendres in word meanings. The uncertainty of meaning relates to the divine. Henry Louis Gates

follow along, or learn to play the cross-melodies too, they are effectively training you to be a trickster as well. Playing the music, or knowing how it aligns to the downbeat as a listener, is a skill in maintaining centered, or as CK Ladzekpo said of drumming, “developing a “resolute fearlessness” in times of stress. It is a wisdom-maker, an exercise in rising above the forces that pull us this way and that.

The fact that jalis master and manipulate time above and beyond our ability to comprehend is a power they possess, and a well-trained jali will use that power carefully for the good of the community. Unlike other musicians who might use fancy improvisations to show off their skills and take the listener on a musical journey, a well-trained jali only goes so far. Maintaining humility by including their participants in the music and the cultural practice is paramount. The music is not meant for entertainment, it is meant to educate. The jali might refer to the downbeat to get listeners on track before manipulating melodies around the rhythm to challenge them. If they are lost, there is no point in pushing the cross-rhythms into further complexity because the message is not understood. To do so is mere egoism. To string listeners along so they can follow, but staying just ahead of them to keep them challenged is the key to “jaliying” a listener. Perhaps this is what confuses Uasuf, Famoro’s apprentice, in the following life lesson.

Training an Apprentice over Time

Uasuf, a thin, tall, young American man born to a Senegalese father, studies balafon with Famoro. stays with Famoro for several days at a time. He is a talented djembe player in

Jr. recalls the minor deity, Esu-Elegba, “the god of divination and gatekeeper of communication with the spiritual world” (Pond 2005: 37). Esu-Elegba plays tricks on the people of society by shifting meanings of the same object from one moment to the next. Like a game of Chess, it teaches to look at every situation from different perspectives, to see the spaces between the objects (or the notes). In essence, the invocation of simultaneous, multiple meanings offer a criticism of logical order that we tend to cling to, as humans, and at the same time promotes a release from the attachment of the logical human mind to reality.

his own right, and is moving quickly in his balafon lessons. Uasuf, wearing jeans and an African dashiki shirt, is sitting quietly on the couch. He is Famoro's apprentice and exercises his knowledge of African-style respect toward Famoro. He doesn't let Famoro carry his own instrument. He jumps to get things for Famoro. He is eager to learn music from Famoro. He is eager to please Famoro. But there are times when he misses the mark. We all do.

Today Uasuf is slumped on the couch while Famoro is fine-tuning his gourds to the balafon keys. Uasuf lets out a yawn and through it says, "Man I'm tired today." Famoro asks, "Why you tired? You not sleep good?" Uasuf answers, "Yes, I slept fine." Famoro responds, "Then you have to ask yourself why you tired if you slept good." He insinuates that there is something lingering under the surface, some mental anxiety to explore. Manding jalis can be very psychologically inclined. This is also part of their business, reading people and what is below the surface.

When Famoro turns the balafon over to work on it, Uasuf jumps to his feet and asks how he can help. Famoro responds, "No, you are tired, you lay down and relax." Uasuf isn't sure if this is sincere or a provocation to test his loyalty. He decides to persist. "No, I'm not here to sleep, come on man, let me help you!" I sense that Famoro wants to do this work alone. They go back and forth a few more times like this. Finally I tell Uasuf, "he doesn't want your help for this. Its okay." Uasuf isn't sure whether to trust my comment but Famoro assures him that it is true. Uasuf sinks back into the couch. It isn't easy to tune in to the master's every whim.

Uasuf exhibits that level of dedication and respect, a rare quality in an American-raised student. Knowing when to give the master his space is another level of tuning in,

an unwritten sensibility that comes with time. These subtleties of learning how to be a good apprentice are mirrored in the balafon lessons, of learning how to be sensitive to the rhythm and feeling in the music. I, on the other hand, have not mastered the balafon rhythms as Uasuf has, but I have learned to read Famoro's subtle insinuations pretty well.

Later, Uasuf and I are on the couch talking, but when Famoro comes in and Uasuf is telling me about his music, he stops. I ask him another question, but he indicates to me that now is not the time for conversation. We must be alert to Famoro. I fall quiet. And so we go, learning our lessons, and helping each other out.

There was a time when Uasuf questioned Famoro's rhythm of teaching. They parted ways for a while. When I asked Famoro about it, he said,

"I had to throw him out of my house."

"Why?" I was shocked.

"He did not respect me well. He tells me I not teaching him fast enough. He needs to know more, more, more. He told me that I am holding back knowledge from him. He's not respectful to me. I told him to get out."

Before a year had past, however, Uasuf had come back to learn again. I imagine Uasuf apologized and showed deference, and that Famoro was pleased to see him learning and growing, just like in Africa. Famoro tells me that these things happen in relationships. It is part of the learning process.

A Hard Time, 2014

Famoro does not just fulfill the role of master to student in New York. He is also the father of Sona, and an uncle to several children who are born and raised in New York

to African parents. How to teach them the African timing of respect and love is very important to Famoro, something that their urban education will not teach them.

Today I arrive and Famoro asks me, “You ready? No balafon lesson today.” I know not to argue, and I’ve come for the journey, whatever it may be. So I follow suit. We take the 4 train to 199th Street in the Bronx to visit his daughter, Sona and her cousins. By the time we arrive it is high noon and the sun is hot. Sona, 16, Miriam, 10, and Fantabe 12, are sitting in the living room, and Fantabe’s mother is walking around, carrying an eight-month-old baby on her waste. These children are Guinean-American. Malinké is the mother tongue, but often the American kids who go to American school speak English to each other and to me.

Miriam boasts to Famoro that she woke up just five minutes before we came. I figure that they must stay up late because it is cool in the evenings; that is what we do in West Africa. At this moment, two fans are blowing on us and it is still screaming hot, characteristic of July in the city. Famoro asks her why she just woke up.

Miriam retorts, “’cause you never tell me what time you are coming!”

Famoro responds, “Why do I have to tell you the time? I say I’m coming today, I don’t have to say what time.”

“If you tell me what time you come, then I can know when to wake up and get ready!” she responds. Miriam is thinking like a New Yorker.

“No, it’s not like that with me. I can visit you when I feel like it,” he tells Miriam. Famoro goes through his day like a soft breeze. He never rushes. He takes his time with people. He goes where he needs to go when he is ready, and not before. “Hey! I come when I want to come, and you know, I always come on Saturday!”

Miriam retorts, “Yeah, but you gotta call us and tell us *when!*”

“No!” Famoro denies this statement. He looks at her wide-eyed, eyebrows raised, with mirth behind his threat. “You! Be ready!” He shakes a finger at her. Miriam can joke with Famoro like this because he occupies the role of her uncle, a relationship that allows for joking and prodding, but it could be a form of disrespect if you were to argue like this with a grandfather, or even a parent.

Famoro is surrounded by the four children. They are draped over him on the two-seater couch. Each one wants his attention and he gives it lavishly. Fantabe walks by, a little somber, and Famoro grabs her and pulls her to him. She laughs and falls onto his lap. Sona gives her dad huge bear hugs. Then, six-year old Aziz takes full attention. I ask him where his Dad is, and he tells me Senegal. “Oh yeah? Your Dad is Senegalese? Do you speak Wolof?” Aziz tells me no, but Famoro knows that Aziz learned some Wolof. He takes Aziz in his lap and says to everyone, “Shhhh, everybody be quiet. He gonna say something in Wolof.” Aziz squirms around on Famoro’s lap, and then stops. He looks up into space. I’m about to open my mouth and Famoro shushes me. Give him time, he motions to me. Everyone in the room is patient and quiet when Aziz suddenly bursts out, “Nnnnnnegaferi!” Everyone cheers. Aziz smiles big. Famoro says, “Okay here comes another one.” Everyone gets quiet. After a few moments, Aziz say, “Ehhhh Nanga Def!” More cheering. Famoro manages to squeeze four sentences out of Aziz and it is a glorious moment.

Miriam tries to engage Famoro in a philosophical conversation about time again, and in the end, Famoro says, “Ah, you give me a hard time.”

“Ah no, you give me a hard time!” They laugh while arguing who gives whom a

hard time. Miriam is upholding an American way of embodying time, one that runs on schedules and planning, one that runs in her school system in her New York City, in my New York City. Famoro knows this, of course, and he is purposely being difficult with her because he wants her to understand the value of another way of doing time, the old-school African way. That kind of time knows no priorities higher than spending time with the people you love, or the things you love, like playing music. In Africa time, to say someone does not love you, you can say, “she doesn’t have time for me.” It is a serious insult if said to a person who supposedly loves you.

It is the same time that we see in the Gambia, Chapter 3 when I was “moving with Sanna.” We took time out when we were walking to a destination to greet people along the way. Do not stop would be insulting, and bad for human relations. Behind the love is also a continual wisdom that *people need people* for happiness and livelihood. This is human nature. Old school Africans don’t forget it, but perhaps we American city-dwellers do.

All human beings have a sense of some relationship between time and love. We take more time for whom or what we love. But in our fast-paced city-lifestyles, another precedence takes priority, most easily described as “time is money” but I might prefer planned time, or schedule.⁶ Planned-time thinkers have a sense of control over all moving parts in our days. And it is the source of much frustration when it does not “go as planned.” When we plan all of our time, we do not allow what naturally occurs to take its course. We fight the natural pace of things. We rush. We cut short times that are

⁶ Edward Hall (the Dance of Life) discusses this phenomenon in terms of polysynchronic vs. monosynchronic time. Polysynchronic time is that which relies on human relations over schedules. Monosynchronic time is that which relies on schedules and agendas. He remarks how there are some societies (like Middle Eastern ones) that are polysynchronic and others (like American) that are monosynchronic. I would generally agree with this.

meaningful, we miss chance encounters, and we show up only when things are supposedly in order. There is something valuable to ordered time, but after living in Africa I see how there is something valuable in the gaps in the schedule as well. This is when the magic happens, the universe can present something new and unexpected.

Famoro won't give in to Miriam. He is imparting a deep cultural lesson to her. He delivers his lessons with humor and fun, but he is serious about it. At every moment he is teaching the children (and me). He teaches them patience, calmness, humor, by example. When Famoro decides that it is time to go, all four of the kids from six to sixteen throw themselves around his legs, imploring him not to leave.

On the subway home, Famoro reiterates what he has already demonstrated: he is giving the children a very important African education that they do not learn in their American schools. He tells me in America, people like to talk a lot. People think they have understood when they talk in this culture. In Africa, "our parents teach us to watch. Be quiet. Observe. You see someone does something you like? Someone knows how to make good money and you like that? You watch him. Don't jump to quickly. You see what he does. You see another person is suffering in life? What do they do to make themselves suffer? You watch. Stay quiet. Then one day you get the inspiration. I teach that to them. In New York, people jump too quickly. They don't take time."

Tying up time

The music is a corrective for the stressed out conditions of life in the city. Like prayer time, when I tune in to Famoro's music, when I get in sync with his time, when I align myself to the downbeat and let the cross-rhythms circulate around as he plays, I am

corrected, re-balanced, soothed, invigorated and relaxed. I lose sense of outer time and become absorbed in inner time. Ethnomusicologist Alfred Schutz described ‘inner time’ as the mutually shared musical space between musician and listener, when the listener becomes absorbed in the musician’s piece. They share an ‘inner time’ isolated from the worldly realm of out there (Schutz 1951). The music is a medicine. It is a training ground, a meditation whose powers can be harnessed and cultivated in life practice.

The time, or downbeat in the music is also a metaphor for your life vision, or purpose, or focus of activity. For example, my time or downbeat right now is to write this book in a way that feels authentic and true to my experience of jaliya. There are many influences in life that can interfere or sidetrack me, and some of them are a necessary part to my life. I must interact with family and friends, and take care of other responsibilities like food shopping. I can get sidetracked by conflicting emotions, thoughts, and inner fears and insecurities for how to express myself best, and for how I will be perceived. Those aspects might be akin to the interweaving melodies, part of life, but the book-writing project remains front and center. Within that center, I must remain relaxed yet energized; focused, but not too rigid. The jali is a master in this kind of attention, which he imparts to us in the ways that he plays, and teaches us to play, his music. When we listen to a master jali, insofar as we understand and follow the art, it works on us like medicine, balancing us, soothing us, putting the varied elements of life back into the flow of things.