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Seye, Elina

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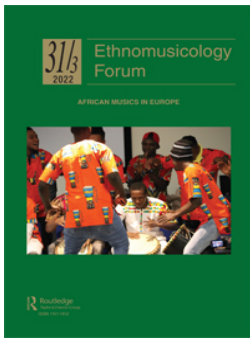
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## Music as a Third Space? – African musics as a field of collaboration in Finland

Elina Seye 

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### ABSTRACT

The history of African musics in Finland has specific characteristics because the African diaspora communities in Finland are relatively young and small. Many African professional musicians living in Finland moved there because of their personal connections with Finns rather than because of broader flows of migration. Despite the minimal numbers of Africans living in Finland, a lively scene of African musics began to develop from the 1980s, and this scene has continued to be characterised by collaborations between Africans and white Finns. This article discusses the early history of African musics in Finland, with a focus on these collaborations that have created cultural spaces where ideas of ‘Africanness’ are central but not strictly tied to Blackness or Otherness, thereby resembling Homi Bhabha’s idea of a postcolonial ‘Third Space’ that opens conventional meanings to negotiation and redefinition.


### KEYWORDS

African music; music scene; collaboration; Finland; Africanness; Third Space

## Introduction

When the first African musicians moved to Finland in the 1980s, the numbers of African immigrants and other people of African descent were much smaller than today. Consequently, the formation of an African music scene in Finland revolved around intercultural collaborations between Finnish and African musicians rather than African diaspora communities. With its late patterns of immigration and small African minority communities, Finland is different from most Western European countries, especially those that had colonies in Africa (Bender 2009: 136–9).<sup>1</sup> However, with its lively African music scene dating from the 1980s and a relatively long history of intercultural collaborations, Finland also contrasts most Eastern European countries (see also, Kärjä 2019: 378).

In this article, I focus on the early years of the African music scene in Finland and the people and ensembles that were central to it during the 1980s and 1990s. Practically all the African artists involved in these scenes either came to Finland as collaborators of Finnish artists or began to collaborate with Finns after arriving in the country. Therefore,

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I approach this scene as a field of collaboration that may resemble the postcolonial ‘Third Space’ described by Homi Bhabha ([1994] 2004: 53–6; see also, Kalua 2009), an in-between space where cultural conceptions need to be reconsidered and redefined. I understand Bhabha’s Third Space as a social space that can come into existence during artistic collaborations between individuals, when their specific personal histories and/or the particular social circumstances in which their collaboration takes place demand them to reconsider their artistic practices. I am not analysing the results of these musical collaborations but rather looking at the processes of mutual adaptation that have been seminal to the formation of the African music scene in Finland.

Thus far, the topic of intercultural encounters and collaborations in the field of music is rather poorly researched (White 2012a: 6), although it has been touched upon in the more abundant literature on ‘world music’ and on the musics of ethnic minorities. There are also studies on African immigrant musicians in Europe (e.g. Anundsen 2014; Bender 2009; Rastas and Seye 2016); and, more recently, on the redefinitions of European identities by younger musicians of African descent (on Afro-Finnish hip hop artists see, Kärjä 2019; Kelekay 2019; Leppänen and Westinen 2018; Westinen 2018). However, one cannot ignore the contribution of (white) Finnish musicians when dealing with the early African music scene in Finland.

In this article, I use the terms ‘African music’ and ‘African dance’<sup>2</sup> mainly due to the lack of better terms but also because these concepts are commonly used by African musicians and dancers themselves (Rastas and Seye 2016: 85), whereas their Finnish collaborators usually prefer more precise terms (CAM, Tampere, 3 August 2013). I still prefer to use the plural form to remind the reader that the field that this article deals with includes a plurality of styles with roots in African cultures. The boundaries of African music are of course subject to interpretation (Agawu 2016: 2–3; Barz 2013) but I will consider as African those musics that are commonly associated with specific peoples or locations on the African continent. However, it is the concept of ‘Africanness’ itself that becomes unstable in the Third Space of the African-Finnish collaborations I discuss in this article.

The primary source materials for this article were produced during a project on the history of African musicians in Finland by Music Archive Finland and the Global Music Centre. For this project, in 2016 I conducted interviews with several musicians and dancers who were involved in the early African music scene in Finland. Some of them also lent their private collections of photos, promotional materials, newspaper clippings and recordings for digitising and archiving. Additional research materials include two recorded group discussions,<sup>3</sup> both of which I organised together with social anthropologist Anna Rastas and in collaboration with Fest Afrika, the longest-running festival of African performing arts in Finland (Rastas and Seye 2016). Further discussions, both in the form of public seminars and informal private conversations, have taken place on various occasions, especially at concerts and festivals. Thus, my interpretation of the African music scene in Finland is based not only on the interviews and other documents at my disposal but also on my long-term experiences as an active participant in the scene.<sup>4</sup>

## Historical overview

The developments that led to a growing interest in African music and dance in Finland and to the formation of a scene are difficult to track down. Although

several of the African immigrant musicians active in the 1980s and 1990s have collaborated with well-known Finnish musicians, they are rarely mentioned in books on Finnish music history. Therefore, the limited written sources on African music in Finland consist mainly of interviews with these artists in newspapers and magazines. The grassroots activities revolving around African musics and dances, which are part of what I am calling the African music scene here, have received even less scholarly attention because these activities centred on specific styles of music rather than on ethnicity, age or class of the participants (Bennett 2004). Today, there are several, partly overlapping, scenes of African musics in Finland but until the 1990s the scene was still one in the sense that the same core audience participated at practically all events that featured African music, regardless of the style of music being performed.

In the 1960s, Finnish folk music went through a period of revival and the growing interest in folk music increasingly extended also to foreign traditions (Ramnarine 2003: 47–66). During the 1970s, there were various Finnish musicians who attempted to increase their knowledge of African music and other non-European styles beyond American blues, rock and folk, which were already widely known and imitated by Finnish artists.<sup>5</sup> Records were usually the primary source materials for these explorations. The most visible product of such worldwide musical interests was the band Piirpauke, founded in 1974 by multi-instrumentalist Sakari Kukko; the band played a distinctive fusion of jazz, rock and folk music. At first, the folk music elements were limited to Finnish folk music but soon the band's style developed into an eclectic mix of various folk and popular styles. Kukko was also seminal in establishing musical connections between Finland and West Africa, because he travelled to The Gambia and Senegal in the late 1970s and early 1980s and played saxophone with local bands such as Étoile de Dakar, where Youssou N'Dour began his career as a singer. On later trips he was joined by a Piirpauke bandmate, guitarist Hasse Walli. Both Kukko and Walli have continued to collaborate with Senegalese musicians to this day (Kukko, interview, Helsinki, 14 April 2016; Walli, interview, Helsinki, 9 May 2016).

Simultaneously, more formal connections were initiated between Finland and Tanzania through a research project by Finnish ethnomusicologist Philip Donner that focused on musical activities in Tanzania. Especially the Bagamoyo College of Arts (now *Taasisi ya Sanaa na Utamaduni Bagamoyo*) in Tanzania and the folk music department of the Sibelius Academy (now part of the University of the Arts) in Finland were involved in exchanges that generated collaborations between Finnish and Tanzanian folk music students and professionals (Matti Lahtinen, email communication, 21 October 2011). These connections to Senegal and Tanzania turned out to be formative for the early African music scene in Finland.

Thanks to the economic boom, the 1980s and early 1990s are remembered by musicians as the 'golden years' for African music or more broadly for 'world music' in Finland. From today's perspective there was an astonishing amount of live music, even though the clubs and concerts of African music were mostly limited to Helsinki apart from summertime festivals (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Flyer for a club night in Helsinki with the bands Piirpauke, Galaxy, and Badu [Ndjai] & White Niggs in December 1994 or 1995. The event was organised by ‘Culture Club Aurora’, a rather short-lived association of artists working in different fields. Apart from the bands performing, the flyer presents in smaller print the featuring musicians, for example Hasse Walli and Raoul Björkenheim (a jazz guitarist), and the people responsible for the stage, lights and sound (Music Archive Finland, Pape Sarr’s collection).

Back then our gigs were sold out and there were queues outside the clubs. There was a boom of African music. There were afro and reggae clubs in Helsinki every week and big events, like Womad in the 1990s. Nowadays, they bring big stars, like Youssou N’Dour and Salif Keita, to Finland but there are no big festivals like that anymore. (Ismaila Sané in BAM, Tampere, 9 July 2011)

Marie-Alphonse Liwata (interview, Helsinki, 9 March 2016) gives a similar account of the club that Hasse Walli All Stars hosted in Helsinki in the early 1980s: ‘We were playing there every Sunday or Monday, I don’t remember. It was very full; it was the first time this kind of music was happening [...] in Finland’.

However, even back then, African music was almost never played on the radio; furthermore, it was almost impossible for bands to get a record deal unless the band leader was a well-known Finnish musician like Kukko or Walli (Hasse Walli, interview, Helsinki, 9 May 2016). With few exceptions and even to this day, albums by bands playing African musics published in Finland have been either self-publications or produced by NGOs such as the Global Music Centre.

With the recession of the mid-1990s, the situation changed completely: there was no longer a demand for live music, no more regular clubs with a house band, and all major festivals that previously had welcomed world music bands limited their programme to mainstream rock and pop. Practically all African musicians who had settled in Finland, as well as the ones who arrived later in the 1990s, have therefore had problems finding enough work in the music field to make a living. For Finnish musicians, the situation was similarly difficult, but they usually had better opportunities to find other sources of income.

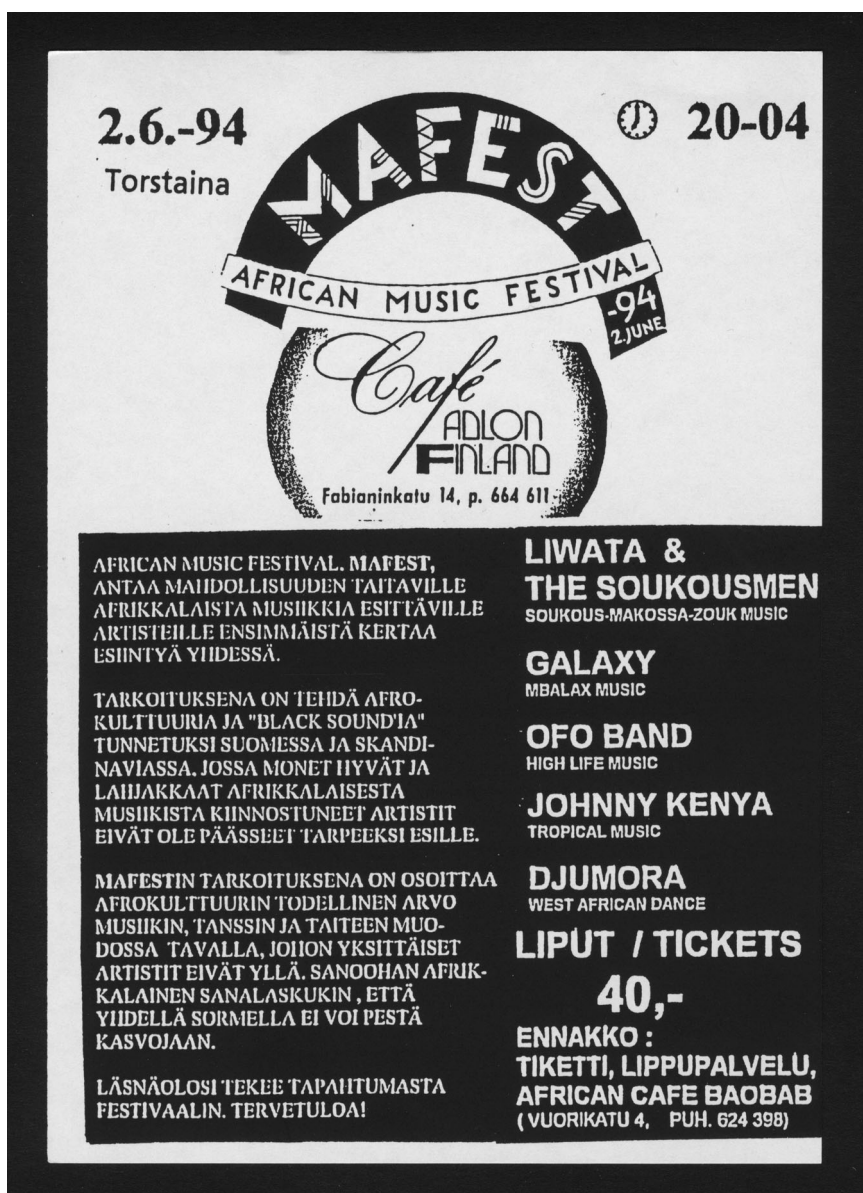
Until today, African communities in Finland are not large enough to create and sustain a regular demand for professional musicians, let alone dancers, so audiences for African musics are nearly always mixed.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, audiences are not necessarily truly knowledgeable about the broad range of African musics, let alone the specifics of these styles, and the artists need to consider how to best present their music to such mixed audiences. In recent years, the demand for live music has improved somewhat but there is also much more competition within the African music scene. In particular, dance clubs led by DJs (such as Afro Sunday in Helsinki) have become increasingly popular and attract new audiences. This ‘Afro club scene’ also reflects international trends more than was the case with the early African music scene that I will present next.

### The early African music scene in Finland

The Finnish African music scene of the 1980s and 1990s could be presented in several ways. For example, by listing the styles performed according to geographical locations of their origins or by a rough division between popular and traditional styles, or by a combination of both. Popular styles in Finland’s early African music scene included *soukous* (Congolese ‘rumba’), *mbalax* (from Senegal) and *highlife* (from Ghana), and traditional styles; mostly various kinds of percussions and related dances from Senegal, Guinea, Ghana, and Tanzania. In the following, I will present some artists and ensembles that were central to the development of the African music scene in the 1980s and 1990s, most of whom are still active today (see also, Seye 2020a, 2020b).

I have already mentioned Kukko and Walli, who invited several Senegalese musicians to Finland to work with them. The first Senegalese musician to settle in Finland was guitarist Badu Ndjai (in Senegal often spelled in French orthography as Badou N’Diaye), who had been leader of *Étoile de Dakar*. Kukko invited him to join Piirpauke for their European tour in 1984, and Ndjai became the band’s guitarist for several years (Afro-Säk-kijärvi 2005; Kukko, interview, Helsinki, 14 April 2016). Around the same time, Walli collaborated with a Congolese musician, Marie-Alphonse Liwata, who had come to Finland a few years earlier due to personal connections made while studying architecture in the Soviet Union. He had not worked professionally as a musician in his native Congo-Brazzaville but he had learned to play traditional percussion with a local expert and was self-taught on guitar and harmonica. While studying in the Soviet Union, Liwata had begun to play solo gigs ‘Bob Dylan style’ and after moving to Tampere, Finland, he formed bands with Finnish musicians (Liwata, interview, Helsinki, 9 March 2016).

In the early 1980s, Liwata and Walli made two LPs with the bands called Hasse Walli All Stars and Hasse Walli Afro-line, both of which mostly performed Liwata’s compositions arranged by Walli. Despite the success, the collaboration did not last long, and both moved on to new musical projects. Apart from his later bands, Liwata was active in the scene as a concert organiser. This included putting on what was probably the first African music festival in Finland in June 1994 in Helsinki, a one-day event that included five Finland-based ensembles representing different styles of African music (see Figure 2). Soon after, the economic crisis hit Finland and Liwata decided to return to architecture and disappeared from the music scene (Liwata, interview, Helsinki, 9 March 2016; see also, Seye 2020a).



**2.6.-94**  
Torstaina

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**MAFEST**  
AFRICAN MUSIC FESTIVAL  
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2 JUNE

*Café*  
ADLON  
FINLAND  
Fabianinkatu 14, p. 664 611

AFRICAN MUSIC FESTIVAL. MAFEST, ANTAA MAHDOLLISUUDEN TAITAVILLE AFRIKKALAISTA MUSIIKKIA ESITTÄVILLE ARTISTEILLE ENSIMMÄISTÄ KERTAA ESIINTYÄ YHDESSÄ.

TARKOITUKSENA ON TEHDÄ AFROKULTTUURIA JA "BLACK SOUND'IA" TUNNETUKSI SUOMESSA JA SKANDINAVIASSA. JOSSA MONET HYVÄT JA LAHJAKKAAT AFRIKKALAISESTA MUSIIKISTA KIINNOTUNEET ARTISTIT EIVÄT OLE PÄÄSSEET TARPEEKSI ESILLE.

MAFESTIN TARJOITUKSENA ON OSOITTAA AFROKULTTUURIN TODELLINEN ARVO MUSIIKIN, TANSSIN JA TAITEEN MUODOSSA TAVALLA, JOIHON YKSITTÄISET ARTISTIT EIVÄT YLLÄ. SANOOHAN AFRIKKALAINEN SANALASKUKIN, ETTÄ YHDELLÄ SORMELLA EI VOI PESTÄ KASVOJAAN.

LÄSNÄOLOSI TEKEE TAPAHTUMASTA FESTIVAALIN. TERVETULOA!

**LIWATA & THE SOUKOUSMEN**  
SOUKOUS-MAKOSSA-ZOUK MUSIC

**GALAXY**  
MBALAX MUSIC

**OFO BAND**  
HIGH LIFE MUSIC

**JOHNNY KENYA**  
TROPICAL MUSIC

**DJUMORA**  
WEST AFRICAN DANCE

**LIPUT / TICKETS**  
**40,-**  
**ENNAKKO :**  
**TIKETTI, LIPPUPALVELU,**  
**AFRICAN CAFE BAOBAB**  
(VUORIKATU 4, PUH. 624 398)

**Figure 2.** Flyer for an African music festival organised by Marie-Alphonse Liwata. The introductory text in Finnish says: 'African Music Festival MAFEST offers an opportunity for skilful artists playing African music to perform together for the first time. The purpose is to make Afro culture and 'black sound' known in Finland and in Scandinavia, where many good and talented artists have not gained enough visibility. The aim of MAFEST is to show the real value of Afro culture through music, dance and art in a way that single artists cannot; as an African proverb says, one cannot wash one's face with one finger. Your presence will make this event a festival. Welcome!' (Music Archive Finland, Marie-Alphonse Liwata's collection).

In the mid-1980s, Walli visited Senegal yearly with the intention of mastering the local *mbalax* style,<sup>7</sup> and in 1987 he moved to Dakar to form his own *mbalax* band. This band was given the name Asamaan, and Walli received a grant that helped him bring the band



to Finland for a summer tour the following year. Hasse Walli & Asamaan was quite successful in both Senegal and Finland in the late 1980s and early 1990s, until the economic depression hit Finland in 1993 and Walli was no longer able to get enough contracts to afford another tour with Asamaan. The band usually spent the summer season in Finland, performing at festivals around the country but also playing as the house band in restaurants in Helsinki, sometimes up to three times a week in the same venue. Asamaan, with its changing line-up, brought nearly twenty Senegalese musicians to Finland. Some of them returned to Senegal and continued their musical careers there but others decided to stay, encouraged by contacts made while touring with Asamaan (Walli, interview, Helsinki, 9 May 2016).

Simultaneously with the newer line-ups of Asamaan, former Asamaan members, bass player Pape Sarr and percussionist Yamar Thiam, began to form a new *mbalax* band in Finland. At first, they played *sabar* and *tama* drums as a duo. Then, together with the singer-saxophonist Rane Diallo, also a former member of Asamaan and of earlier Étoile de Dakar fame, they put together a larger band with the name Galaxy in 1992. Galaxy quickly became the most prominent band of the African music scene, although according to Pape Sarr, their audiences were larger in Estonia than in Finland. The band also had a few hits in Senegal. However, after a promising start, the live music scene was hit by the declining economy and Galaxy members soon had to find other employment to make a living. Both Asamaan and Galaxy are exceptional bands in the Finnish-African music scene in that most musicians were not only Africans but from the same African country. Nonetheless, Galaxy's line-up has also included several Finnish musicians over the years (Sarr, interview, Helsinki, 22 March 2016; Diallo, interview, Helsinki, 14 March 2016; see also, Seye 2020a).

The most active ensemble performing traditional African music and dance in Finland in the 1990s was Djumora, consisting of four Finnish dancers who had studied West African dances abroad. Their performances were modelled after West African 'ballets', such as Les Ballets Africains from Guinea. Djumora worked together with African dancers and percussionists whenever possible, among them the Senegalese dancer-percussionist Ismaila Sané, who regularly visited Finland after he became a member of Piirpauke in 1989 (Sané, interview, Helsinki, 21 April 2016). Additionally, Djumora occasionally invited African artists based elsewhere in Europe to join their performances. One of these guests was Guinean dancer-musician N'Fanly 'Alya' Camara, who later became the husband of Djumora's leader Outi Kallinen and moved to Finland in 1996. A few years later they formed a new group called Wonuwali, which similarly consisted mostly of Finnish dancers and musicians (Kallinen, interview, Helsinki, 27 Apr 2016; see also, Seye 2020b).

We can already see in these few examples that most bands playing African musics included both Finnish and African musicians and that the formation of an African music scene was to a great extent initiated by individual Finns' passion for African musics. Several African professionals would never have come to Finland without being invited.<sup>8</sup> Their intention was usually not to immigrate to Finland but some ended up staying because work prospects seemed good<sup>9</sup> and some for personal reasons, typically after having married a Finn. However, none of the artists and bands of this era were able to continue a career in both Finland and the relevant African country or region, and most have struggled to find enough employment in the music field. The peripheral geographic location of Finland made touring even elsewhere in Europe expensive, and

keeping up contacts with audiences in Africa was difficult before the expansion of the internet.

### Countering stereotypes

The diverse personal routes that brought African musicians to Finland and led some Finnish musicians to become experts in African musics has contributed to a multiplicity of expressions of Africanness in their musical activities. This multiplicity has become even more varied in recent years. Still, the stereotypes that musicians working with African musics face seem to have remained constant. For example, Liwata (interview, Helsinki, 9 March 2016) reported that the bands he had with Walli in the early 1980s were often asked to dress in 'African clothes' for their shows. This is something that he always objected to, because for him concerts are about the music and not the attire. Along the same lines, Senegalese singer and bass player Ndioba Gueye (panel discussion, World Village festival, Helsinki, May 2018) said that he was approached a few years earlier by organisers of an Italian festival but when they realised that all the other musicians in his band were Finns, they lost interest in booking him. Similarly, Finnish musicians and dancers have mentioned instances when the organisers of an event or audience members have been visibly disappointed when they have noticed that several members of the 'African group' coming to perform are white.

These expectations for performers of African musics to 'look African' can be linked to conceptions of 'difference' and 'otherness' that Sara Ahmed (2000: 116–8) has connected to Western consumer culture, stating that 'differences that can be consumed are the ones that are valued' (Ahmed 2000: 117). Especially in music, the idea of a (consumable) 'difference' is inherent in the concept of 'authenticity', as Paul Gilroy (1993: 99) has noted while discussing the marketing of 'black' cultural forms to white audiences. Black people are more easily understood as performers of African music or dance, as 'the real thing', especially if they also dress in a way that evokes the imagery of Africa (see also, Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2012: 202–4), whereas a white musician or dancer has no claim to such immediate authenticity. Still, the music should not sound too strange, too different from what audiences are used to hearing, otherwise it is likely to be rejected as unconsumable, to continue with Ahmed's thoughts. Therefore, bands playing popular African styles usually have better chances of reaching broader audiences, being musically closer to the globally distributed popular music mainstream, whereas traditional styles are typically attractive only to smaller circles of enthusiasts, although they are more easily recognised as 'African'. Thus, the bands playing African musics are often caught in a crossfire of contradictory expectations: their music and performances should be recognisably African but at the same time not 'too African' (see also, Anundsen 2014: 113–6).

For example, the core group of Galaxy consists of musicians that all had careers in the Senegalese popular music scene before coming to Finland and only one of them, percussionist Yamar Thiam, is an expert in traditional drumming. Nevertheless, in Finland the band members have also performed as a percussion group with the name Galaxy Drums or Senegalese Drums, playing traditional Senegalese rhythms. As Galaxy Drums, they have also collaborated with several Finnish musicians and bands, and played in the huge 'Global Balalaika Show' of the Finnish parody rock group Leningrad Cowboys

alongside numerous other guest artists (Sarr, interview, Helsinki, 22 March 2016; see Figure 3). Often the band would also play one or two percussion pieces in their own concerts that otherwise consisted of *mbalax* style songs. It might well be that the percussion pieces were intended for the Senegalese audience members, catering to their nostalgia for back home, but they certainly also served to underline the Africanness of the group to Finnish audiences.

Such stereotypes about African music equalling drumming and Africans ‘having rhythm in their blood’ (see also Bender 2009: 134, 144–5; Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2012: 193–7), can thus be used by African musicians for promotion, just as colourful ‘African’ outfits, but they may also work against them. Zambian musician Izai-zai Yikona (interview, Helsinki, 7 June 2016), who has been mostly working in the reggae scene in Finland where he is known as ‘Papa Zai’, notes that for years he was involved in school projects that were supposed to promote multiculturalism<sup>10</sup> and because Yikona is a musician, he was often asked to teach ‘African drumming’. He had experience with traditional Zambian music so he would sometimes do what was asked of him but he felt that providing the schools with stereotypical African activities would not serve the purpose of these projects:

I worked for a project called *MaaIlman kulttuurit kohtaavat* [‘cultures of the world meet’] on two occasions. And what I noticed there was . . . the idea was to reduce racial tensions [...] and I found it amusing that we went there to reduce stereotypes by doing stereotypical things. ‘Africans play drums’, that’s a stereotype . . . but maybe we do play some piano, as well, or guitars [...] so that made me more interested in the aspect of communication and conversation, analysing things. (Yikona, interview, Helsinki, 7 June 2016)

The stereotypical idea of Africans having rhythm in their blood has also meant that Finnish audiences are not necessarily able to distinguish who is a professional musician and who is not, or they do not even care as long as the performance matches their



**Figure 3.** Galaxy on stage with the Finnish jazz band Krakatau in 1996 (Photo by Mikko Saarela. Global Music Centre picture archive).

expectations. In the words of Ismaila Sané (in BAM, Tampere, 9 July 2011): ‘They only want to see the image; a black guy banging a drum’. This misconception that any African can play drums or dance is understandable to African musicians, because many African traditions encourage participation from the audience and in concerts people from the audience may step onto the stage to dance or to play a drum for a while. Unless you know the musical style being played quite well, it may be hard to distinguish who is a professional and who is not. Furthermore, many African musicians have learned their skills informally or within traditional systems of education; therefore, they may not have any official proof of their expertise (BAM, Tampere, 9 July 2011; see also, Nanyonga-Tamusuza 2012: 197–8).

However, similar misconceptions about the simplicity of African drumming and dancing also exist among Africans. In the words of Menard Mponda, Tanzanian dancer-percussionist and the artistic director of Fest Afrika festival:

Actually, it comes from back home. [...] You know, this is the attitude [...] that anybody can dance, anyway, and anybody can play drum. [...] Now it has just started to change, because these drummers and dancers [...] can take a flight to Europe, because of drum and dance. [...] We first have to appreciate what we have. For instance, like this festival we put up . . . the Finns they come and pay without questions but when the Africans come, they ask ‘can you put me on the [guest] list’, you know, they are not showing their appreciation. The same person will go to a night club without the question ‘how much’ [...] and there’s no performance, nothing. (BAM, Tampere, 9 July 2011)

This topic came up once with a West African percussionist living in Sweden, who confirmed that the same pattern also happens in African music concerts there. The financial circumstances of some African immigrants may partly explain this phenomenon, but this might also be shaped by internalised colonial conceptions of Africans and their traditions as ‘primitive’ in contrast to ‘civilised’ European cultures. This conclusion is supported by the observed change of attitude when Tanzanian musicians and dancers are invited to perform in Europe. Mponda’s observations of a lack of appreciation for local traditions in Tanzania were echoed by the experiences of Ismaila Sané in Senegal, who described the disbelief of his family members when he told them he would travel to Europe to perform with his dance group.

Another well-known example of this lack of appreciation towards African music and especially drumming is apparent in the way that certain Africans with only rudimentary musical skills have presented themselves as ‘African master drummers’ to earn some money, especially during the 1990s recession when work opportunities were scarce (see also, Bender 2009: 134). Understandably, the few actual professionals living in Finland became quite bitter, because their skills were not acknowledged. Also, they had few opportunities to negotiate salaries, as another African percussionist could easily be found to perform or teach if they refused. Similar feelings of bitterness can be read between the lines in the reluctance of certain musicians to be interviewed for the above-mentioned project on the pioneer generation of African immigrant musicians. When they first came to Finland, they encountered an appreciative audience hungry for ‘world music’ but during the 1990s recession they were marginalised into ‘African musicians’ whose Africanness seemed more important than their musical skills.

Although some Africans see it as their duty to spread knowledge about African cultures in Finland, in order ‘to build a better future for our children’ (Ismaila Sané in

BAM, Tampere, 9 July 2011), it has proved difficult to counter deeply engrained stereotypes of Africa and Africanness. People will often notice only those aspects that correspond with their pre-existing conceptions of Africa.<sup>11</sup> Both African and Finnish musicians gave examples of how their explanations about their music or performances had been misunderstood or misinterpreted by journalists, resulting in representations that enforced stereotypes of Africa rather than enlightening audiences about the roots of their creations.

I gave many interviews, but I did not understand Finnish [...] I was being honest, speaking like to Africans. Years later, I had the chance to read [the interviews] and I was in shock! Because what I was saying it sound[ed] to me that it was not true. [...] If they would ask me the same question again, I would not answer the same way. (Liwata, interview, Helsinki, 9 March 2016)

Once there was a large photo of us in *Helsingin Sanomat* [a major newspaper]. [...] I don't know who had been there [for the interview] but I was not present [...] and they [members of Wonuwali] had told the journalist about the dances but they had not taken into account that the journalist might not understand much about the topic. So, in the article it said something like: 'The group performed among other things the dance *Soli* that describes circumcision<sup>12</sup> and one can see in the dancing that this operation is brutal and violent.' [...] They had been trying to give information but the journalist had made their own interpretations. But there was a nice picture, anyway. (Kallinen, interview, Helsinki, 27 April 2016)<sup>13</sup>

Despite facing prejudices, many of the African musicians who have lived in Finland since the 1980s and 1990s claim that they have rarely experienced overt racism in Finland. During those early years, they were usually approached with curiosity, because when they first arrived there were very few immigrants and even fewer Africans living in Finland: 'It was a nice time, we were so few, we were a bit exotic. [...] There were not so many problems. It was before the Somalis came'<sup>14</sup> (Malang Cissokho, interview, Helsinki, 7 March 2016).<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, Kukko remembers that when Badu Ndjai became a member of Piirpauke, he was not always well received by Finnish audiences. Especially, seeing a black man playing '*Konevitsan kirkonkellot*', Piirpauke's early hit<sup>16</sup> based on a traditional Finnish *kantele* piece, was just too much for some (Kukko, interview, Helsinki, 14 April 2016).

## (Re)defining Africanness

Despite all the stereotypical ideas about Africanness, African immigrant musicians still commonly present themselves and their music as 'African'. The same habit has been observed in Central Europe by Wolfgang Bender (2009: 135): 'The answer "African" or "West African" is a truthful reply, inasmuch as it is music circulating among Africans or West Africans. In Europe, it has no name, and at home it might not exist in that particular form'. One could add that the names of African music genres are not very widely known in Finland and therefore it is often easier to state that one plays 'African music' than *soukous* or *mbalax*, for instance. A further reason might be that more precise definitions may be hard to find: the name of an African country, for example, might not be relatable or accurate either, because its borders may not correspond with cultural divisions.

The term 'African' might also be a practical choice when some bands have members from several African countries, as well as a way of showing solidarity towards other

Africans living in Finland, welcoming them to take part in concerts and performances despite cultural differences. In short, the word choice may reflect both pan-Africanist thinking of African unity<sup>17</sup> and a pragmatic strategic essentialism (Gilroy 1993: 31–2; McConnell 2019: 133). In any case, the term used by African immigrant musicians of this generation is certainly ‘African’ rather than ‘black’ (in contrast to the UK and the USA, as discussed in Gilroy’s 1993 classic *The Black Atlantic*). Even after living for decades in Finland, they usually do not identify themselves as ‘black Finns’ or ‘Afro-Finns’ like some younger people of African descent do.<sup>18</sup> In fact, when I asked one musician for his permission to write an entry about him for the *Encyclopedia of Afro-European Studies* (a website unfortunately no longer available) in 2012, he questioned the term ‘Afro-European’ and the idea of including him as an African living in Finland in a collection of ‘Afro-European’ personalities.

Furthermore, the term ‘African’ does not necessarily include even all people born on the continent. For example, Somalis – who form the largest African diaspora community in Finland – were unanimously defined as ‘black Arabs’ rather than Africans by participants of the discussion ‘Being an African Musician in Finland’:

Aliko Mwakanjuki [Tanzanian musician and event organiser]: Somali culture is Muslim culture; it is very Arabic. There is a difference between Arabic Muslim and African Muslim [...]

Ismaila Sané: They don’t mix with us, they push us [away]. [...] I remember one time in Helsinki, I went to an African shop and there was a [Somali] lady [working in the shop] and she asked me ‘where are you from?’ I said ‘Senegal’, [she responded] ‘*aah, mashallah mashallah*’ [and asked] ‘what is your name?’ I say ‘Ismaila’, ‘*aah mashallah, Muslim?*’, ‘yes, yes’, ‘and what you are doing here?’ I say ‘music’, she says ‘What?!’ I repeat ‘music’, she says ‘*haram, haram, haram ...*’. I say ‘What, why are you insulting me?’ She says ‘Music is *haram* and everyone who does music is *haram*’. [...] I was very angry.

Menard Mponda: The Africans that came as refugees often keep to their own communities and isolate themselves from others.

Ismaila Sané: There was even one Somalian who called me [the N-word in Finnish].

(BAM, Tampere, 9 July 2011)

This distinction between Africans and Somalis as ‘black Arabs’ may also be a strategy to distance oneself from the Somalis, many of whom arrived in Finland as refugees during the 1990s recession. The reception of refugees in these tough economic circumstances generated negative attitudes towards Somalis among Finns.

The link between Africanness and blackness is also called into question when African musicians talk about their (white) Finnish collaborators as being capable of ‘sounding African’:

George Lauwo [Tanzanian DJ and event organiser]: I was having a party downstairs here [in Telakka, a restaurant in Tampere] and there was a band ... there was Hilton Marowa [a singer from Zimbabwe] but he was being backed by Finnish instrument players. Now, they played for an hour and then I couldn’t notice the difference, whether this is a Finnish band or an African band.

Aliko Mwakanjuki: Yeah, you go to those kinds of concerts nowadays; you close your eyes [...] you hear African music, totally.

Ismaila Sané: And in general, those musicians are musicians who are coming from the reggae [scene] or maybe folk music. [...] Like there is this boy . . . guitar player [...] he's somebody who is learning every kind of sound from African guitar, everything, from Mali, from Senegal, from Congo, you know, he's really good.

Menard Mponda: There are many who we have worked with, like Topi [Korhonen] from PolePole.<sup>19</sup>

Aliko Mwakanjuki: And like the leader of Stilimba band ...

Ismaila Sané: Maarika [Autio] playing balafon ... and Outi [Kallinen].

(BAM, Tampere, 9 July 2011)

What 'sounding African' means is not exactly clear but what is pointed at in the above discussion is the commitment to learning to play African music needed to achieve this kind of Africanness. Thus, Africanness seems to refer here more to professionalism and fluency in an African style of music than to ethnicity or cultural identity. Finnish musicians would, of course, not identify themselves as Africans but at least a few of them do similarly see that it is possible for a Finn to become an expert of African music, which according to some includes learning to think about music in an 'African' way (Janne Halonen, Outi Kallinen and Sakari Löytty in CAM, Tampere, 3 August 2013).

### Music as the Third Space

It was statements relating to Africanness, voiced by African immigrant musicians living in Finland, that led me to suggest that music can serve as a kind of Third Space. Bhabha ([1994] 2004: 53) describes the Third Space as the in-between space 'that carries the burden of the meaning of culture' – or, in this case, the meaning of Africanness and African music in particular. However, Bhabha ([1994] 2004: 54) also emphasises that 'the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity', and thus the concept of Africanness can be reinterpreted and redefined. Indeed, such redefinition appears to have occurred through Finnish-African collaborations and musicians' experiences of playing African musics to Finnish audiences. A sharp contrast is evident between Finnish audiences' stereotypical notions of Africanness – primarily defined by blackness and other innate qualities – and the musicians' ideas that, by contrast, relate Africanness to cultural practices and musical competence.

In relation to music, Bhabha's concept of Third Space has often been equated with the type of hybridity that has characterised many musical styles within the 'world music' category, typically falling somewhere between local traditions and the Euro-American popular music mainstream. Timothy Taylor (2007: 145–6) notes that 'hybridity' may itself become the new 'authentic' and thereby something that is attributed (only) to the non-Western. This tendency is indeed visible already in the above-mentioned examples, where bands playing African popular music – that were hybrid styles to begin with – are expected to dress in 'African' outfits to underline their otherness while playing music that is palatable also to a Finnish audience with little experience of African musical traditions.

However, I would not interpret the Third Space in this context as something inevitably resulting in hybrids, if they are to be understood as combinations of 'African' and

'Finnish' or 'European'. Rather, the liminality of the Third Space offers the potential to reconsider and redefine identities, conceptions and musical practices in new ways (Bhabha [1994] 2004: 41; see also, White 2012b: 195). This might include the above-mentioned example of the concept of Africanness becoming detached from blackness and attributed to white Finnish musicians, or at least to their musical skills.

The musical hybridity arising from the collaborations between African and Finnish musicians has only rarely meant combining 'African' with 'Finnish' music. In many cases, this is simply because most of the Finnish musicians in question have had more experience of popular music genres of African American origin than of traditional Finnish music or other distinctively local styles. Most of the African musicians were naturally also familiar with the same styles of popular music before leaving their African home countries. For example, the oldest of my interviewees, Marie-Alphonse Liwata (interview, Helsinki, 9 March 2016) lists among his early musical influences the African American artists James Brown and John Lee Hooker.

In general, the Finnish musicians of the early African music scene have worked diligently to broaden their musical repertoire and skills in one or more African styles. By contrast, few of their African collaborators have made comparable efforts to study Finnish music. However, as immigrants all have most certainly been forced to rethink their role as musicians and to adapt their musical activities to a new environment. A rare exception to this overall picture is Tanzanian musician and dancer Arnold Chivalala, a graduate and former teacher of the Bagamoyo College of Arts, who was repeatedly invited to participate in music and theatre productions in Finland, until in 1995 he decided to stay permanently. During his visits, he had become interested in Finnish folk music, which he then began to study at the Sibelius Academy, selecting the Finnish *kantele* as his main instrument. Chivalala later gained an artistic doctorate in music at the Sibelius Academy; his doctoral work explored the similarities of Finnish and Tanzanian folk music (Chivalala 2009; see also Seye 2020b).

Kukko (interview, Helsinki, 14 April 2016) states that he has often encouraged his Senegalese collaborators to sing more in Finnish or make arrangements of Finnish songs and include them in their repertoire, because that might help them gain more attention from Finnish audiences. According to him, Badu Ndjai has been one of the few musicians who has made serious efforts to learn more about Finnish music, whereas others have relied on input from their Finnish collaborators. Along the same lines, some African musicians criticise their fellow Africans for insisting on playing only African music. For example, Zambian singer Bina Nkwasi (interview, Helsinki, 10 May 2016) says that it is understandable that Africans want to perform the type of music that they feel closest to. But in a small country like Finland it is necessary to be flexible and offer the audiences something to which they can more easily relate. This does not necessarily mean learning any distinctively Finnish style of music. Nkwasi herself has been able to make a living in music by singing blues, jazz and rock, and by doing a lot of studio work, such as singing background vocals for Finnish artists.

However, even those musicians who have been open to playing different styles of music and who have collaborated with well-known Finnish artists have not necessarily been able to make a living from music alone. For example, the Senegalese singer, percussionist and *kora* player Malang Cissokho (interview, Helsinki, 7 March 2016) took up taxi driving after a nearly 30-year career in popular music in Senegal and Finland. He first



came to Finland as a singer for Asamaan, then played congas in the soul-jazz-hiphop fusion band Cool Sheiks and subsequently in the highly successful J. Karjalainen Electric Sauna.<sup>20</sup> Through Electric Sauna most Finns have also been exposed to the sound of the *kora*, because Cissokho played it and sang one verse in Mandinka language on the band's hit song 'Väinö'. In addition to playing in these bands, Cissokho has self-published several solo albums that include his own compositions and traditional West African songs with *kora* accompaniment. The widely shared sentiment that it is impossible for an African musician to make a living in Finland is thus not completely unfounded but there are also some examples to the contrary.

Whether the collaborations between Finnish and African musicians have resulted in hybrid musical expressions or not, most collaborations have certainly included mutual learning. Even in cases where the collaboration has ended in disagreement, such as Liwata and Walli, both parties typically speak of the other with respect.

I was learning to be a musician when we worked together with Hasse Walli. [...] He gave me the chance to meet . . . because when I came to Finland, I started from the top, to play with the best musicians in Finland. [...] With Hasse, I have about 200 cassettes; I taped all my concerts [...] after the concert I would go to my room, I put on my headphones and start to listen . . . and to analyse. And the next morning, I would say to Hasse, 'Hey, listen . . . what was this?' [...] So I was studying all the time . . . that way I developed myself. (Liwata, interview, Helsinki, 9 March 2016)

In later collaborations, Liwata sometimes had to take the role of a teacher. It was often necessary to teach his Finnish band-mates Congolese rhythms so that they would be able to perform his compositions in the way he wished:

I have also helped many younger musicians here, especially drummers and guitarists. [...] When they started to play with me, they had to break their rigid way of playing, to be more flexible with the rhythm. And when they went back to [playing] rock, they became famous. This is where they have got some of [their style]. [...] Because they were very young, they were also very curious. (Liwata, interview, Helsinki, 9 March 2016)

When asked about what they have learned from their African teachers and collaborators, and what has changed in their own musical practices, Finnish musicians typically answered that they learned about rhythm and ideas about musical structures. For example, in the panel discussion 'Collaborating with African musicians', Outi Kallinen emphasised that for being able to play with others, one must understand how that particular style of music works, and how it is structured, although there might not be clear rules that others could explain. This sometimes requires changing one's conceptions of music: 'Here, people may think that rhythm is rhythm and melody is melody but in Guinea, actually, the drum rhythms are quite melodic; there's always a melody and other instruments may be played quite percussively' (CAM, Tampere, 3 August 2013).

As for the African musicians, they often mention how collaborations with Finnish musicians have helped them to navigate the Finnish work environment but it is much harder to get answers to the question, 'What has changed in your music or thinking about music after coming to Finland?' Probably they have had to find new ways to communicate their musical ideas with their Finnish collaborators, especially if they have been teaching their music to them. Guitarist Janne Halonen, who together with Beninese singer-percussionist Noël Saisonou founded Helsinki-Cotonou Ensemble<sup>21</sup> explains

his and their Finnish band-mates' struggles when learning the Beninese rhythms that the band's music is based on:

First, it's really hard to find the 'one' and of course it's important to find the 'one'. And no matter what Africans say, I'm very frustrated about that issue. [...] Of course, if I would have been listening to that kind of music, those grooves, for ten years before actually starting to practise to play that; then it would be easy to say that 'just feel that and start playing' but since I am the guy who just flew in like a day ago and wants to learn, then [...] I need good systems of learning, I think. [...] Even the band members . . . once they understand the foundation of the groove, they understand the count behind it, through repetition . . . they start to hear . . . and they stop the counting. But you have to start from somewhere. (CAM, Tampere, 3 August 2013)

As Ahmed (2000: 180) states, the 'differences between us necessitate dialogue, rather than disallow it – a dialogue must take place, precisely *because* we don't speak the same language' [original emphasis]. According to my understanding it is exactly this type of dialogue and search for mutual understanding, despite differences, that also Bhabha refers to with his concept Third Space. For professional musicians, such dialogues, the encounters with others, can take place through music. This is not to repeat the old myth that music would be a 'universal language' (Dave 2015: 2–5; White 2012b: 190–4) but to stress that professional musicians are often eager to learn about new styles of music and to incorporate influences from the foreign styles they have learned to their own music. When they show an eagerness to learn, their collaborators will also try to figure out how to help them learn the things they do not yet understand, as in the account by Halonen. Thus, through shared music-making, it may be easier to reach the Third Space of an intercultural, interindividual dialogue (Bhabha [1994] 2004: 56) than through words, because similar negotiations about the meanings of each other's ideas are quite commonly part of any musical collaboration, even between musicians from the same cultural background.

It is thus likely that musicianship itself forms a point of connection, a common ground for both musical and verbal dialogues that may result in something new. Some African musicians actually seem rather tired of answering questions about cultural differences; the ethnicity of their collaborators does not matter to them as long as they are able play the music they want. For example, Ndioba Gueye, who first came to Finland as a member of Asamaan and has since played with many Finnish artists of various genres in addition to his own bands, has stated on several occasions (e.g. in a panel discussion at the World Village festival, Helsinki, May 2018) that he would actually just like to play his own music without having to define it as African or Senegalese. For Gueye and many other musicians, both African and Finnish, working with different styles of music and collaborating with musicians from different musical and cultural backgrounds is already an ordinary activity instead of something fraught with problems caused by cultural differences.

## Conclusions

What is quite striking when looking into the early years of the African music scene in Finland, is the centrality of African-Finnish collaborations to the formation of the scene. Whether traditional or popular styles from whatever region of Africa, most ensembles had both African and Finnish members. Furthermore, most African musicians

ended up settling in Finland as a result of their personal connections with Finns rather than as a result of general trends of immigration. The largest cities in Finland, especially Helsinki, the capital, were the locations where the formation of this scene with its intercultural collaborations took place. Helsinki in the 1980s was certainly no 'global city' (Stokes 2004: 64), at least not in the same sense as larger European capitals and other world metropolises, but in the small scale of Finland it was (and still is) the most diverse location within the ethnically and culturally remarkably homogenous Finnish nation state. The second main location for the early African music scene was the city of Tampere, in the 1980s the second largest city in Finland, that boasted two universities and a lively rock scene.

Due to the small size of the African diaspora communities and the fact that the African music scene has always been ethnically mixed, negotiations of Africanness have been ongoing. Whereas stereotypical ideas of Africa and Africans have often characterised the reception of African music, the musicians' views of Africanness are more fluid and not necessarily defined by blackness. Therefore, I have proposed the idea of music, and especially the activities of making music together, functioning as a Third Space, where African and Finnish musicians have been able to meet as equals and learn from each other, despite the prejudices of Finnish audiences, and where it has been possible to leave stereotypical notions on Africanness and Finnishness behind and develop new musical ideas. As Born and Hesmondhalgh (2000: 22) similarly conclude for the case of African American music, African musics in Finland have provided spaces for intercultural dialogues between collaborating musicians. Nonetheless, dialogues between musicians and audiences have not necessarily resulted in the same kind of (third) spaces that would likewise lead audience members to rethink their conceptions of Africanness.

## Notes

1. Even Finland's Western neighbour, Sweden, has a much larger population of African descent than Finland (McEachrane 2014: 6). Nevertheless, the African diaspora communities are relatively small in all Nordic countries and similar developments and discussions as presented in this article have also taken place elsewhere (see Anundsen 2014 on Norway; Eyre 2018 and Sawyer 2006 on Sweden).
2. Even when I use only 'African music', one should keep in mind that dance is practically always relevant in this scene and some of the artists involved identify themselves primarily as dancers.
3. One was a group interview for invited participants ('Being an African musician in Finland' [BAM], Tampere, 9 July 2011) and the other a panel discussion open to audience participation ('Collaborating with African musicians' [CAM], Tampere, 3 August 2013).
4. During the mentioned interviews and discussions, I had the impression that I was considered an 'insider' by most of the people I talked with despite being a white Finn and not a professional musician or dancer. Many of them were aware that I had been involved in the African music scene since the mid-1990s, primarily as a participant at various events and to a lesser extent as an organiser of events. Some of them also knew that I had been learning West African dances and drumming for about twenty years, as well as Tanzanian dances for a shorter time, in addition to having done research on the *sabar* tradition in Senegal. Still, a few African musicians that I contacted did not want to be interviewed for the mentioned project, even though I have talked with them on other occasions about the same topics. Additionally, one interviewee did not want the recording of their interview archived but gave me personal permission to use it for research purposes.

5. The 1970s also saw the emergence of a localised Finnish-language rock genre, *Suomirock* (lit. 'Finland rock').
6. According to Bender (2009: 133), the situation is quite different in Germany and elsewhere in Central Europe, where African immigrant musicians may continue their careers without much contact to the majority population.
7. For a concise history of the *mbalax*, see Tang (2007: 154–9), see also, Duran (1989).
8. Inviting African musicians to Finland was not difficult in the 1980s and 1990s, unlike today. According to Hasse Walli (interview, Helsinki, 9 May 2016), getting a visa was a mere formality, at least if one could present work contracts in Finland.
9. A similar account from Norway can be found in Anundsen (2014: 148).
10. Many African musicians have worked in such projects, where their role has primarily been to represent Africa and their countries of origin (Rastas and Seye 2016: 88–9). The problems of the concept of 'multiculturalism' are also discussed by Anundsen (2014: 127–9).
11. For a similar observation on the reception of recordings of African music, see Feld (1996: 11).
12. The *Soli* is a festive dance related to initiation rituals among the Malinke people.
13. Translated from Finnish by the author.
14. Translated from Finnish by the author.
15. Similar statements were made by Sarr (interview, Helsinki, 22 March 2016) and Bina Nkwasi (interview, Helsinki, 10 May 2016).
16. The piece was included on Piirpauke's debut album in 1975, on which the guitarist is Hasse Walli.
17. See Kalua (2009: 25–9) for a critical overview of pan-Africanist thinking.
18. A similar generational divide can be observed in Anundsen's (2014) discussion of African immigrant artists in Norway.
19. PolePole is a duo consisting of Tanzanian Arnold Chivalala and Topi Korhonen, a Finnish folk musician.
20. J. Karjalainen is a singer-songwriter and a pioneer of the *Suomirock* genre (mentioned in note 5).
21. Helsinki-Cotonou Ensemble was founded in 2012 so it does not represent the early African music scene in Finland but the experience Halonen explains corresponds with those of other Finnish musicians.

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