

# The Rise of African Drumming among Adult Music Learners in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

The present study aims at further examining an interesting finding of a recent empirical research on Hong Kong adults' participation in African drumming from a sociological perspective by adopting some Bourdieuan concepts. Results of the semi-structured interviews with 82 informants with diverse musical backgrounds and occupations concur that African drumming was hardly evident in Hong Kong before 1991, but related learning programmes have burgeoned in recent years. This study finds that the rise of African drumming among adult music learners over the past two decades in Hong Kong where the African residents only amount to a very small proportion (less than 0.3%) of the total population is the consequence of the two-phase habituation of a receptive attitude towards the ethnic musical tradition. The new habitus has been gradually formulated by highly acknowledged individual and group, first in the field of professional education of percussionists and later in the field of community music, where the cultural capital of African drumming has been increasingly convertible into symbolic capital and economic returns.

**Keywords:** African drumming, Adult music learners, Bourdieu, Forms of capital, Field, Habitus, Practice

## 1. Introduction

As a frontline music educator, I have witnessed the burgeoning of African drumming activities and growing numbers of participants of a wide age range from toddlers to seniors over 80 years old in the Hong Kong society in the past two decades. Similar phenomenon has been evident in many cosmopolitan cities in the developed West where there are significant portions of African expatriates in their ethnic compositions (Hull, 1998, 2006; Panayi, 2007; Skeef, 1999; Winders, 2006). What then are the underlying causes of the rise of African drumming activities in Hong Kong—a city where the African residents only make up less than 0.3% of the total population (Census and Statistics Department, 2006)?

Based on findings of an empirical research on Hong Kong adults' participation in African drumming (Lee, 2009), the present study aims at further examining the rise of African drumming among adult learners in Hong Kong in the past two decades within a sociological framework by adopting some Bourdieuan concepts.

## 2. The background study

The empirical research conducted by Lee in 2009 was a qualitative and inductive inquiry. A grounded theory approach was adopted as the methodology. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with adult learners on a one-to-one basis in the period from January to September 2008. The participants were encouraged to respond freely to certain broad topics, such as their first-time participation in an organised learning course of African drumming, their personal musical background, and their subjective feelings towards African drumming. Actual content of each interview session hinges on the interviewee's responses to the broad outline and the researcher's probing. In this sense, although a maximum of one and a half hours per interview was set aside, the actual duration of the interviews varied, ranging from fourteen and a half minutes to one hour and forty-two minutes. To ensure confidentiality, the interviewees are distinguished by different pseudonyms in all kinds of written reports including this paper.

As the research aims at producing a substantive theory about adults' participation in learning the African drums, research participants were primarily selected via a theoretical sampling strategy. However, a mix of convenience and snowball sampling was also applied in the sense that apart from the initial group of 13 interviewees with whom the researcher is acquainted, all the other participants were identified by those who had been interviewed. The total number of research subjects and who they are were only clearly revealed upon completion of the fieldwork. The process of interviewing stopped at a point of saturation when incoming data only displayed repetitions without shedding new light on the evolving theory. Of all the 82 adult learners of the African drums

interviewed, 24 are male and 58 female. They demonstrated a wide age range from 19 to 81 at the time when undertaking the interviews, diverse musical backgrounds from beginners to professional musicians, and a variety of music and non-music occupations, embracing percussionist, school music teacher, pianist, musician who plays a string, a woodwind, or a brass instrument, designer, office worker, social worker, school teacher of non-music subject(s), businessman, bus driver, retiree, and housewife.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed via thematic coding. In the early stages of the research process, each incident was coded line by line into as many categories as possible so as not to leave out any potential elements of the evolving theory. As the research progressed, coding became somewhat selective and was delimited to the properties of the core categories that had been identified and confirmed.

Results of the study reflect that African drumming activities were hardly evident in Hong Kong before 1991 and that individual responses to the socio-cultural conditions have caused the adults' increasing participation in and varied motivations for learning the African drums.

### 3. The Bourdieuan concepts

Based on findings of the empirical research, the present study attempts to adopt the Bourdieuan notions of the social world as formulated by endeavours of agents and institutions to accumulate and exchange different forms of capital in different social fields and the interplay between habitus, practice, and field to explicate the rise of African drumming among adult music learners in Hong Kong after 1991 from a sociological perspective.

The Bourdieuan concepts applied in this study include: cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, symbolic capital, field, habitus, and practice. In Bourdieu's thesis, capital is accumulated labour in its materialised form or its embodied form (1983/1986). Economic capital refers to the most material types of capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money. Cultural capital, first introduced by Bourdieu (1973), signifies non-financial assets that involve educational, social, intellectual, and artistic knowledge in both tangible and intangible forms. Bourdieu (1983/1986) further elaborates the concept of cultural capital and presents three forms of cultural capital to us: the *embodied* state manifested as long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, the *objectified* state manifested as cultural goods (e.g., books, encyclopaedias, musical instruments, etc.), and the *institutionalised* state manifested in the form of educational qualifications. According to the same source, social capital is the sum of the "actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (ibid., p. 248). In other words, it signifies all the possible benefits accrued to a person because of her/his membership in or affiliation to a specific group. Symbolic capital designates a person's honour, prestige, or recognition by others (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). According to Bourdieu, all forms of capital are mutually convertible.

Field, habitus, and practice are three important and interrelated concepts in Bourdieu's works. A field can be any dynamic social arena where agents or institutions compete and struggle to establish the valuable and legitimate capital within the field in order to maintain or alter the power structure (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). A field is also a context from which the habitus and practices evolve. Habitus and practice demonstrate a reciprocal relationship. While habitus is a set of durable dispositions developed from practices in past experiences, it in turn reproduces practices by informing and structuring people's actions and behaviours (Bourdieu, 1972/1977; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/1990). A particular socio-cultural field is delimited by the common practices within it and the kinds of capital that people could accumulate by engaging in those practices.

### 4. Findings and analysis

The rise of African drumming among adult music learners in Hong Kong in the past two decades can be understood as the consequence of the two-phase habituation of a receptive attitude towards the ethnic musical tradition at both the micro level in the field of professional education of percussionists and the societal level in the field of community music. (Note 1)

Results of the interviews reflect that there were hardly any signs of African drumming activities in Hong Kong before the formation of the first local Afro-drum group, the Island Sundrum, in 1991. It is interestingly noteworthy that the rise of African drumming in Hong Kong is largely driven by the local percussionists' enthusiasm and efforts. As mentioned previously, in huge divergence with the cosmopolitan cities of the developed West, Hong Kong has only received a small percentage of African immigrants. Only a couple of them are making a living as musicians or drummers. Being the minority, impact of these native African musicians cannot parallel that of the local Chinese drummers. The inception and early development of African drumming can be attributed to the Island Sundrum's contribution to the popularisation of the ethnic musical tradition in the

Hong Kong society, on which further development and burgeoning of African drumming activities are predicated.

#### *4.1 Legitimation of African drumming as a valuable cultural capital*

Interview results corroborate that the Island Sundrum was initiated by a prestigious and highly respected local percussion master who has been actively engaged in both the performing and teaching arenas since the mid 1980s. The percussion expert invited the percussion majors of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) (Note 2) and some of his private percussion students to attend weekly rehearsals and he also volunteered to offer free coaching to the group. Being the head percussion teacher of the HKAPA and an acclaimed percussionist, the drum master enjoyed extensive interpersonal networks in the local music profession. His competence in percussion performance and his social web have earned him good reputation. Because of his prestige or symbolic capital in Bourdieuan term, the drum master was able to attract most of his adult students to join the group even though they had utterly no idea of what African drumming was about. For example, Yvonne Chiang, a classical percussionist, recounted (interview conducted on 11 June 2008):

My percussion teacher encouraged me to join. That was about 18 years ago. Usually I will try things out if it is recommended by him. He's an adept and you know, a very professional musician.... Well, I had no idea what it [African drumming] is before the first rehearsal. My first impression of it is that it's noisy and raw, but somehow musical and nicer than I could have imagined.

Yvonne's narrative reflects that while the percussion specialist's reputation is not viewed as a form of capital that can be directly exchanged for economic returns in the conventional sense, it does imply a kind of leverage (symbolic power) that helps legitimise the competency of playing the African drums as an embodied state of cultural capital valued within the field of professional education of percussionists. This accounts for the rise of African drumming among the professional percussionists in the early 1990s even though it was not instituted as an official course or module in the music curriculum for the percussion students of the HKAPA then.

According to Bourdieu (1980/1990), and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), habitus is the product of history, which has been gradually developed in practices over a long time, hence durable. However, it remains an open system constantly subjected to modifications stimulated by new experiences. Similarly, practice is also durable but not eternal as it is informed and structured by habitus. In the light of this, the percussion students' willingness to learn to play the African drums and the successful establishment of the Island Sundrum should not be viewed as sudden and drastic changes in practice, but consequences of the percussion master's long-term dedication to imparting an egalitarian attitude towards music in his percussion students. The narratives of some adept percussionists attest to their eclectic mindset towards music, which has been developed during their prior studies at the HKAPA. For instance, Aaron Wong expressed that percussion should be viewed as one big family of musical instruments (interview conducted on 17 January 2008):

Percussion is a big family. It shouldn't be compartmentalised into groups of varying significance in terms of the [ethnic] origins. We were trained to play the Western percussion instruments and the Chinese instruments. Sometimes, we also played the Latin, the African, or whatever. I believe that a well-versed percussionist should be able to play instruments of different ethnic origins. I will continue to learn various kinds of percussion instruments if time allows. This is a lifelong pursuit for percussionists.

Another veteran drummer, Abby Chan, rendered a similar opinion (interview conducted on 18 January 2008):

I object demarcation between different percussion genres. Percussion signifies percussion as a whole. You can specialise in one area, but shouldn't neglect others, shouldn't have the anti-foreign attitude because percussion instruments belong to the same big family.... Although I am a Chinese percussion major, I have also learned to play the Western percussion instruments. My teachers have repeatedly emphasised the need to learn all kinds of percussion instruments.

The two excerpts, when examined by a Bourdieuan lens, provide vivid illustrations of how cultural capitalism is achieved via the dynamic and interactive operations of the field, habitus, and practice. The cultural field here refers to the contexts of percussion education at the HKAPA and private training under the tutelage of professional percussionists, where the habitus has emerged. The habitus here refers to the percussionists' egalitarian attitude towards music, which is deeply rooted in the long-term practice of learning to or having to learn to play percussion instruments of various ethnic origins during prior music training in the field of professional education for percussionists, and which in turn reinforces and perpetuates the practice, hence delimiting and characterising the field of percussion profession. In this sense, the interplay of practice, habitus,

and cultural field renders a tenable explication of how the percussion master's symbolic power has been extended to the younger percussionists' readily receptive attitude towards African drumming.

#### *4.2 Popularisation of African drumming via the media and education*

With the percussion master as its founder and active exponent, the Island Sundrum has been accrued with part of its founder's symbolic capital and symbolic power, which enabled the group to further promote the culture of African drumming in the society. Being the only Afro-drum group since its establishment until the late 1990s, the Island Sundrum has dedicated long-term efforts to habituating a positive or receptive attitude towards African drumming as a form of community music among the general public via the media and education.

In the realm of the media, the Island Sundrum's active involvement in all sorts of promotional programmes has resulted in legitimising African drumming as a form of community music in the Hong Kong society. Laura Ko, a veteran member, recalled (interview conducted on 26 February 2008):

We were invited to take part in a lot of indoor and outdoor live shows in those days [the early 1990s], nearly once or twice a month. Some were paid jobs and some were voluntary works. I enjoyed very much performing outdoors. We often attracted a large audience and it's like a fiesta for fun rather than a serious concert or performance.

Ada Chung, another experienced drummer, recounted her most memorable experience of giving performance of African drumming (interview conducted on 13 June 2008):

I remember a couple of years ago, one time we performed on APA's [HKAPA's] Open Day. There were so many audiences—the APA students and lots of guests from outside. They occupied the open areas on all three storeys of the building.... At one point, we shouted 'hey' and they responded frantically by shouting back 'hey' to us. The atmosphere was terrific and buoyant.... I am most impressed by the fact that African drumming can bring people happiness. The audience enjoyed very much the performance and they gave us instant feedback. That's amazing—that kind of interaction. When they gave us fervent responses, we were extremely happy and played the drums with more energy and impetus.

Another senior member of the Island Sundrum, Page Cheng, expressed similar opinion that the fun of interacting with the audience is most wonderful and memorable (interview conducted on 18 March 2008):

The most memorable performing experience is the one at the City Hall. We hired a professional tailor to make the costumes, one outfit for each member. The performance was plotted as a drama. We sang and put on tattoos on the face—ourselves [the performers] and the kids [the audience]. We also used various African drums and xylophones to make music. From time to time, we gave cues to the audience—guys and kids—to join in the music with the handy percussion instruments that they had brought along. It was a versatile performance. In the last act, we even went down [the stage] to invite the kids to come up the stage to have fun together. We often add in some interactive elements [in the performances]. That was most impressive.

The accounts of Laura, Ada, and Page testify to the Island Sundrum's efforts and achievement in popularising African drumming among the wider public by exposing them to the ethnic musical tradition and conveying to them a pleasurable and carefree ambience of group drumming, as well as a strong sense of hospitality that welcomes everybody's (regardless of age) participation in music making, which cannot be experienced via attending a concert of Western classical music. As a result, a positive attitude towards African drumming has been gradually habituated among the general public.

Apart from live performances, the first local Afro-drum group also contributed to popularising the art of African drumming by exposing itself to the public through multimedia broadcasts. A number of interviewees expressed that they became interested to learn the African drums after watching the drum master's interview excerpt and the Island Sundrum's demonstration on television.

Furthermore, the Island Sundrum has helped further popularise African drumming in the community by making possible hands-on experience of playing the African drums and the first-person experience of engaging in group drumming among the general public via educational endeavours. Most veteran members have offered tutelage in large-scale drumming workshops for children, teenagers, adults, and the elderly, which were mostly sponsored by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD)—the local government department in-charge-of cultural affairs. This scenario reflects that the Island Sundrum's symbolic power has even impacted on the local policy of cultural development and attracted the government officials to collaborate with the group to further promote African drumming in the society by investing economic capital in accumulating the cultural capital of African drumming for the society.

The impact of the Island Sundrum's promotional efforts attests to Bourdieu's (1994) notion that ideological influence can be effectively extended through education and the media. The wide acceptance of African drumming as a form of community music in the late 1990s and the further burgeoning of related drumming activities in the 2000s can be viewed as manifestations of the receptive ideology towards African drumming infiltrated into the Hong Kong society via education and the media by the drum master and the Island Sundrum.

#### 4.3 *Reproduction of habitus and practice*

The Island Sundrum's years of active involvement in the performances, multimedia publicity, and education of African drumming have resulted in habituation of a positive mindset towards African drumming among the general public. This welcoming attitude (the habitus) has been gradually formulated in the field of community music as increasing numbers of people have been exposed to African drumming in related activities (the practices), and it in turn has triggered a chain of reactions (new practices) that have ushered in an era of proliferating Afro-drumming activities of all kinds.

The 2000s has witnessed an influx of people with diverse musical backgrounds into the performing, education, and other related businesses of African drumming. This phenomenon conveys a clear message behind: an increase in the exchange value of the embodied cultural capital (the competence of playing the African drums) due to increased recognition or legitimisation, in other words, the symbolic value, attached to it is likely to attract more people to engage in related practices so as to accumulate or exchange the cultural capital.

Not only has the habitus (the public's welcoming attitude towards African drumming) drawn more people to involve in the practices of performing and teaching the African drums, it has also induced some creative practices in both the public and the business sectors. According to Bourdieu, habitus is like an "art of inventing", which can produce "an infinite number of practices that are relatively unpredictable (like the corresponding situations) but also limited in their diversity" (1980/1990, p. 55). In this regard, the government department of cultural affairs, the LCSD, has collaborated with the Island Sundrum and sponsored a series of large-scale drumming events for the public. In the business sector, habituation of African drumming in the field of community music has induced the largest retailer of musical instruments in Hong Kong, Tom Lee Music Company limited (Tom Lee), to pioneer in trading the objectified cultural capital—African drums. Calvin Ng, an adept percussionist, contended that Tom Lee started to sell djembes made of synthetic fibres instead of animal skin and tree trunk in 1995. He elaborated (interview conducted on 4 February 2008):

These instruments are less weighty and not susceptible to changes of weather. They are more suitable for the school kids.... They [Tom Lee] started to import this type of African drums in large quantity mainly because of the increasing demand from schools. My percussion teacher [the drum master] and Tom Lee have frequent communications. Tom Lee will respond to my teacher's requests and opinions.

Calvin's narrative also attests to the extension of the symbolic power of the drum master and the Island Sundrum to the private sector. As the symbolic value of the embodied state of the cultural capital of African drumming increased, the private sector was more willing to invest in accumulating the relevant objectified cultural capital—i.e. the hardware, the instrument, as it was envisaged that there would be greater demand for the African drums which could possibly be converted into higher economic returns later on.

Apart from trading the instruments, the business sector has also increasingly involved in sponsoring large-scale drumming events open to the public for free, according to Edith Huang, a school music educator with 15 years' experience in teaching (interview conducted on 3 February 2008). The interviewees who have participated in these community drumming events and those who have watched others participating in these drum circles as bystanders reported that these drumming activities were usually held at public venues such as the Fringe Club and the open area outside the Cultural Centre since they aimed at attracting as many people as possible to become involved together in the active music making. As these drum circles are held in public places, they are also bound to attract a large number of onlookers, thus swiftly and effectively spreading the ethnic music culture in the society. In this sense, increase in the symbolic value of competency in African drumming as a cultural capital as well as an effective means of commercial advertisement, whereby sponsors of the drumming events could expect to generate monetary profits in return, has attracted greater sponsorship from the private sector.

The process of converting economic capital (money spent in sponsorship) into symbolic capital (fame or popularity gained from sponsorship) and later back into economic capital (greater profits) by the private sector is particularly evident in the narrative of Nathan Handras, a Jewish businessman who has taken up group drumming as a regular pastime. He recounted (interview conducted on 11 August 2008):

When I came to Hong Kong [to settle and to establish my own business here], I...one day, I crossed Tsim Sha Tsui, and I heard somebody playing drums, and then I think, oh, it's a very very em...you know, I like the music. Oh, it's something that I like. It's the drumjam. I've been to many places in the world and I've never been exposed to such rhythm.... There were signs that Tom Lee is sponsoring, and then I checked the website and then found out, oh they are offering African drum classes. So I just signed in.

Nathan's story illustrates that as the symbolic value of the embodied cultural capital of African drumming continued to rise, the business sector was no longer content with making profits by accumulating and trading the objectified cultural capital (the African drums) only, but would also like to engage in activities to accumulate or hire the embodied cultural capital (e.g., employing professional drummers who are competent in playing and teaching the African drums) so as to appropriate the objectified cultural capital (i.e., the African drums) as a means of production in Bourdieu's conception (1983/1986) in a bid to diversify its business by organising African drum classes for prospective clients in addition to the extant services that it was offering (e.g., selling musical instruments) and to increase economic returns in the field of community music.

Against the backdrop of the habituation of African drumming as a form of community music in the Hong Kong society, the period from the late 1990s until present features mounting public performances of African drumming in concert halls as well as other indoor and outdoor venues, e.g., public amenities, hotels, shopping malls, schools, and university campuses. According to the active drummers, African drumming has become one of the highlights in a variety of functions such as the handover of Hong Kong ceremony in 1997, the annual gala commemorating the anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region (HKSAR), opening ceremonies of institutions and festivals, corporations' annual dinners, district carnivals, beauty contests, and open days of schools and institutions. Also, organised courses of African drumming for people of all ages have been proliferating inside and outside the formal education sector. The socio-cultural changes have provided a favourable breeding ground for the rise of African drumming among adult music learners in Hong Kong over the past two decades.

## 5. Conclusion

The above analysis illustrates Bourdieu's (1980/1990, p. 54) conception of habitus as "a product of history", which "produces individual and collective practices—more history" —in accordance with the schemes generated by history. In this study, it is found that the welcoming attitude towards African drumming in the community was a result of the promotional and education endeavours initiated by the drum master and the first local Afro-drum group, which in turn has caused an influx of people into the performing and education businesses of African drumming, and other creative practices initiated by both the public and the private sectors.

In addition, the analysis also demonstrates Bourdieu's notion of the convertibility of different types of capital. The drum master's embodied cultural capital and social capital have gained him substantial symbolic capital, which in turn has won him more social capital, embodied cultural capital, and symbolic capital, hence symbolic power. To be more explicit, the drum master's superiority in percussion performance and extensive interpersonal networks in the field of percussion profession have gained him substantial recognition and prestige as a renowned professional percussionist, which in turn have won him voluntary members to form the Island Sundrum, group drumming experiences with the Island Sundrum instead of playing the African drums alone, and reputation for being the founder of the first local Afro-drum group, hence greater influence in the field of percussion profession.

Accrued with part of its founder's cultural, social, and symbolic capital, the Island Sundrum has extended its symbolic power in the field of community music, habituating a welcoming attitude towards African drumming among the public by exposing Hong Kong people to this ethnic musical tradition via all sorts of promotional and education endeavours. As African drumming is increasingly recognised and accepted as a form of community music, its symbolic value increases and the competency in playing the African drums is increasingly convertible into other types of capital or returns, hence attracting more parties and individuals to engage in related practices in order to accumulate and exchange both the embodied and the objectified states of the cultural capital of African drumming. This attests to what Bourdieu has written in "The Forms of Capital": "The convertibility of the different types of capital is the basis of the strategies aimed at ensuring the reproduction of capital" (1983/1986, p. 253).

The findings and analysis of this study agree to Bourdieu's (1980/1990) delineation of habitus as embodied history, but diverge from Bourdieu's pessimistic and deterministic perception of the social world. Results of this study reflect that change is possible, but takes time. Highly acknowledged individuals or groups with substantial symbolic capital in a particular social field are able to gradually divert others from the conventional habitus and

to educate them to embrace the new habitus and practice via long-term dedication and efforts. This thesis is illustrated in this study as follows: the drum master and the Island Sundrum are able to dissuade the percussion students of the HKAPA and the wider public from their customary mindset—unawareness of African drumming as one of the musical traditions that exist in the world as well as a form of community music, and to cultivate in them a welcoming attitude towards African drumming based on greater exposure to and the ensuing familiarity with the ethnic musical tradition, as well as to espouse the public's participation in all sorts of related activities in the long run.

## 6. Epilogue

This study has found the rise of African drumming among the adult learners in Hong Kong in the past two decades as a history of two-phase habituation of a positive mindset towards the ethnic musical tradition, first in the field of professional education of percussionists and later in the field of community music for the general public. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that individual musicians, music educators, or institutions are capable of effecting gradual change in the public's attitude towards ethnic music and enriching the elements of community music. This finding diverges from Bourdieu's deterministic and pessimistic perspective of the social world. In the light of this, we must ask the question: are we, music educators, determined and well prepared to act as change agents to contribute to the move towards multiculturalism and the higher goal of equality in music education? I suggest that introspection and retrospection of our rationales in teaching the African drums and other ethnic music cultures should be the focus of further research.

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#### Notes

Note 1. The term *community music* is defined differently in different parts of the world (Veblen and Olsson, 2002). Despite the nuances, all definitions emphasise that everyone has the right and ability to make and create music, and imply opportunities for a wide range of participants to learn music and to engage in music making through diverse mediums and musical experiences.

Note 2. The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) is the only higher arts education institution in Hong Kong that provides professional education, training, and research facilities in the performing arts, theatre and entertainment arts, and film and television production (refer to the website <http://www.hkapa.edu/>). Its School of Music is dedicated to training professional performers, composers, and voice and instrumental teachers. It has graduated more than 40 percussion majors ever since its establishment in 1984.