Creativity Revisited: Narration and Embodiment in African Art*

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After half a century at the forefront of scholarship, the topic of artistic creativity in sub-Saharan Africa has lost much of its glamour. In light of her apprenticeship to a basket maker in northwest Zambia the author revisits the work of several scholars who have written on the topic, arguing that visualism and logocentrism are ultimately detrimental to the understanding of the creative process. Creativity, she argues, blossoms in art making when the artist's mind and skillful body coalesce in engagement with materials. Consequently, a theoretical and methodological reorientation to the study of creativity is in order, one in which, together with observation and interviewing, the experiential methodology of apprenticeship is uniquely promising.

Creativity is not simply an idea; neither is it the artwork. Ideas can be inspirational and artworks reveal creativity, but the creative process also unfolds in art making when the artist's mind and body coalesce. Since this holistic experience is inherently embodied, words to describe it do not always come easily to artists. So the question that researchers of art must ask is how to study the creative process during fieldwork and to describe it in writing when, as scholars, we are often predisposed to privilege the mind and the word over the body.

In this article, I bear this question in mind as I revisit the scholarship on creativity in so-called traditional African art, a seminal, highly cohesive corpus best represented, perhaps, by *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, edited by Daniel Biebuyck (1969), and *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, edited by Warren d'Azevedo (1973). First, I disclose the propensity of those scholars to prioritize reason over embodiment, and the spoken word over the senses, a propensity that continues to define current interdisciplinary scholarship of creativity in the arts and sciences. It is my conviction that logocentrism is ultimately detrimental to our understanding of artistic creativity in Africa and elsewhere. Logocentrism reduces creativity to an idea, and the creative act to the mechanical, though masterful, materialization of that idea. Second, I bring out a handful of thought-provoking, firsthand accounts from the abovementioned scholarship of creativity in Africa, accounts that echo the insights that I gained during my apprenticeship to a basket maker in Chavuma District, northwest Zambia, in the mid-1990s. During fieldwork, I found solace in alternating my study of divination practices (Silva 2011) with interludes of basket making. In Chavuma, women coil and men plait and twine, regardless of their ethnicity—Luvale, Chokwe, Luchazi, or Mbunda (Silva 2003, 2004). I apprenticed myself to the late basket maker Keuka, then an elderly Luvale woman, and basket maker Mutondo, then a Luvale man in his early thirties. Although this paper is more conceptual than ethnographic, I draw on my apprenticeship in basket plaiting with Mutondo to substantiate conceptual claims and suggest new pathways. Third and last, I end with a methodological note. Our concepts ought to

illuminate the merging of ideas and bodily acts, and our methods, ought to be both word-based and hands-on. It is not possible to recognize, grasp, conceptualize, and write about the merging of ideational and bodily forms of intentionality in art making unless we resist logocentrism and reorient ourselves theoretically and methodologically.

After half a century at the forefront of scholarship, the topic of artistic creativity in Africa has lost much of its glamour. Now and then, key contributions continue to emerge (Brett-Smith 1994; Hoffman 1995; Kasfir 2011; Strother 1998), but by and large the study of creativity has turned to other realms, from farming and masquerades in central Mali and the social life of pharmaceuticals in Uganda to anti-government rebellion in Algeria (see Hallam and Ingold 2007; Lavie et al. 1993; Liep 2001; Wooten 2009). In this paper, without minimizing the intellectual sophistication, originality, and even political importance of these contributions, I refocus on art making and bring back the phenomenon of artistic creativity in Africa into current discussions of creativity in the arts and sciences. I also hope to inspire other scholars of African art in its multiple expressions, including the so-called contemporary or modern art created in Africa and elsewhere, to reconsider the creative act, that special moment when the artist gets hold of materials—whether Mutondo, the Zambian basket maker with his reeds and ropes or Moussa Tine, the Senegalese painter with his acrylics, recycled plywood and metal mufflers (Roberts and Nooter Roberts 2012:420-421)—and sets to work.

Seeing, Thinking, Narrating

From the tradition-versus-creativity debate that occupied many scholars of so-called traditional African art mostly between the 1930s and the mid-1980s, a consensus emerged: African artists are neither a spring of unbound creativity (no one anywhere is) nor are they mechanical reproducers of models passed down to them from previous generations. They live within the bounds of their sociocultural world (as everyone everywhere does), and it is their creativity, always a complex blend of psychological, biographical, cultural, social, and historical factors that engenders stylistic innovation and change.

Scholars also noticed the poised, measured, and rational stance of African artists in the midst of creation. They reported that creativity in African art derives not from a visceral outpouring during the creative act, as the modernist stereotype would have it, but from images seen, remembered, and analyzed *prior* to that act. Sometimes the source of these images is the artwork of other artists, which the African artist registers as an image; more often, though, these images emerge inside the artist, frequently in dreams where tutelary spirits appear to deliver them.

I offer here a sample of scholarly narratives on the sources of creativity in African art. The designation "African art" and the choice of medium (sculpture) and cultural area (the sculpture belt that stretches from Senegambia to south Central Africa) reflect the interests as well as biases characteristic of the extant scholarship, not my own.

Mali

"Bamana artists receive detailed visual images of their art works from their *djinns* (Brett-Smith 1994:169)." "The apprentice's visual memory must produce a clear mental image that can serve as an internal model for his carving (Brett-Smith 1994:175)."

Liberia

"The archetypical Gola artist is one who 'dreams', and whose creative inspiration is supported by a very special relationship with a tutelary…. His work in life is focused on activities that express the quality of the *neme* friendship not only in his personal behavior but in the creation of external forms that project the 'ideas' given to him by his spiritual companion (d'Azevedo 1973:335)."

Benin

"In Benin… dreams… are a major source of innovations. As David Omergie of the carvers' guild explains: 'The spirit of the ancestors works in me, directing me. When I sleep I see things I have never carved before. If I have a big order I will do it step by step, and every night the ancestors will teach me step by step. I have faith in the ancestors because I have learned more from dreams than from actual studying (Ben-Amos 1986:62).'"

Nigeria

"[Yoruba] carvers explain that one must be able to "see" or visualize the completed work in order to anticipate the steps to be taken during the carving process. Artists must also possess a visual or photographic memory *(ironti),* the ability to analyze, absorb, and retain visual data and be able to incorporate such material into their art. A master carver from Pobe elaborates, 'God has given me a good memory. When I see a sculpture elsewhere, I remember it and then return to carve one like it…. [A good carver] must be an observant person *(alabojuto),* one who sees well and remembers' (Drewal 1980:9)."

Democratic Republic of the Congo

"When asked how he [a Chokwe carver] got his ideas for carvings, he said that he planned them before hand while he was resting or working on other objects. In his words, *Kausonga mubunge yenyi* ('I make them up in my heart'). When asked if he ever got ideas any other way, he told about having a dream wherein he saw a snake swimming in a lake while birds around the lake began to chide or mock the snake. When he awoke, he decided to carve his dream (Crowley 1973:242)."

These narratives suggest that creativity in sub-Saharan Africa is both a visual and mental phenomenon. Thanks to what the authors—art historians and anthropologists—consensually describe as a stunning visual memory, African artists register visual images of their future work not on paper, film or digital memory cards, but within themselves. As an elderly Edo member of the carvers' guild put it, carvers do not work from drawings but from their heads (Ben-Amos 1986:62). A period of thinking and analysis of the inner image often ensues, during which the artist translates that image into carving steps.

Only at this point, scholars say, artists put their hands to work. Their sociocultural worlds will predispose them to seclusion in some out-of-the-way studio or exposure to public appraisal in the village plaza, and to create in one take or several brief episodes; but, as scholars view it, their ultimate goal is one and always the same—transform a mental template into a concrete artwork. The faster and more accurate this transformation is, the more impressed are scholars.

Note that art historians and anthropologists are not alone in the prominence they give to visual imagery in creativity.[1] Writing in the 1990s, psychologists Howard Gardner and Constance Wolf stated that Picasso had a notorious ability to form visual-spatial images in his head and, "thanks to virtuoso bodily ability… render these forms with rapidity and accuracy" (1994:55). The abundant psychological literature on the problem of creativity in the arts and sciences of Europe and North America repeatedly suggests that here too creative individuals see images in their head. Indeed, not only do creative individuals see images within, often in a flash and in one of the three classic "b" situations—the bed, the bath, or the bus—but sometimes see them in dreams. (Think here of the German chemist August Kekulé, who in 1865, while dozing off in a chair by the fire, arrived at the ring shape of the benzene molecule upon seeing an imagined snake seizing its tail [Boden 1990:26].) Psychologists also continue to describe creativity as a conceptual space, a mental process, a form of intelligence and problem-solving, and a personality-related phenomenon (Boden 2004; Feldman et al. 1994).

The sciences and humanities are rooted in a long rationalist tradition, and these roots spread sideways across disciplinary boundaries. The stated source of creativity is bound to vary cross-culturally, with Africans often speaking of images given by spiritual beings who appear in dreams, and Westerners, who long lost their muses, deifying "the mind's own resources" (Boden 2004:40); yet scholars in art history, anthropology, and psychology similarly describe creativity as an imagetic and mental phenomenon. In anthropology, as early as 1917, Alfred Kroeber, a student of Franz Boas, argued that culture belongs to the realm of the extrasomatic, which he called "the superorganic" (1917). And as late as 1979 anthropologist Richard Anderson wrote: "All of human culture exists only in people's heads…. Traditional aesthetic standards, the artist's imagination, and the viewer's affective reaction to a work of art are of primary importance; the object itself and the skillful activities that went into its production are interesting, but they, again, are imperfect reflections of the mental processes and constructs that exist only in people's minds" (1979:120). For Anderson, immaterial images and ideas rank higher than the act of art making and even the artwork, sight and thinking rank higher than touch. Like the shadows in Plato's Cave, the object and the skilled body are viewed as "imperfect reflections" of a mental reality.

Needless to say, I do not wish to understate, and much less deny, the importance of inner visualization, visual memory, and problem-solving in creativity—phenomena that the

abovementioned scholars of African art describe so clearly and systematically. In northwest Zambia, the context I know best, several basket makers report similar experiences. Their source of inspiration is Kalunga (God), and the patterns that they see are said to appear in their head *(mutwe)* and heart *(muchima)*, the seats of thought and understanding for the Luvale and for related peoples who reside in this region. Equally notorious is the fact that similar accounts have been recorded from so-called contemporary (read modernist) African artists. Nigerian artist Ben Enwonwu reported that his images of Ogolo masquerades first appeared to him in dreams (Ogbechie 2008:200). Seyni Camara, a Senegalese sculptor from Casamance, informed her interviewers that her sources of inspiration—God, the sacred grove, and a personal shrine—come to her in dreams (Forni in press).

Nor do I wish to imply that the first-hand accounts reported in the literature are inaccurate. The high degree of cross-cultural and cross-genre recurrence speaks for itself, and the cultural expression of the source of creativity in the form of images revealed in dreams by spiritual beings is in agreement with the recorded propensity in sub-Saharan Africa to project onto the ambivalent realm of the outer spirit world processes that in the West are oftentimes deemed intrapsychic (Jackson 1989:45). Dilley's comment on the dream images of Tucolor weavers holds sway across the continent: the sources of creativity and inspiration (I would qualify these sources as ideational) lie beyond the artists themselves (1992:80-82).

I wonder, however, about the extent to which the artists' narratives might represent post facto rationalizations of the creative process. We do not know what those inner images look like, partially because scholars seemingly omitted to ask the artists to describe those images in detail *prior* to art making. So how are we to interpret such narratives—as information *tout court* to write down in fieldnotes and to offer as corroborating evidence in scholarly writing, as culturally predicated responses and interpretations, or as a blend of information and cultural performance acted out in response to the researcher's frontal questioning? Johannes Fabian argues that "much cultural knowledge is performative rather than informative, and that this has consequences for the way we think of ethnography…. In our fieldwork we are occasions for, sometimes producers of, cultural performances that may range from reciting a set of kinship terms to putting on a full-blown ritual spectacle" (1999:25-26).

At the very least, the artists' narratives beg the question—why? Why this emphasis on visualization and analysis? Why the omission of the body in the creative process, an omission that even the stoutest of rationalists would probably dispute if only they momentarily reflected on their own creative moments. Eureka flashes do not always happen during dreams and dream-like states of consciousness. I, for one, need to put my fingers to work in order to think.[2]

In a divided world in which Africa continues to be stereotypically relegated to the realm of the body and emotions, in opposition to the intellectual sophistication of the West, it is laudable to see scholars flipping the stereotype around and depicting Africans as rational. This flip, however, which brings the African artist closer to the image of the self-assured Western intellectual than it does to the image of the tormented, emotion-driven Western artist has led to the fragmentation of the holistic phenomenon of creativity. The logocentric model perpetuates a view of creativity in Africa in which the artist's skilled hands, aided by the right tools, mechanically replicate mental images into material form—paradoxically suggesting, contrary to ingrained tenets, that art is

craft.[3] Yet art, much like craft, both *derives* from a mental image and *emerges* during the creative act. Here the body has a say, an intention if you will. Here, imaging, analysis, and body intentionality meet and merge.

The plastic arts are not just visual; they are malleable. Let us then start with the sense of touch. Aristotle urged his readers to trust only the sense of sight, and Plato, his teacher, regarded touch as the lowest sense—but do artists (Carpenter 1969:206)?

Touching, Sensing, Moving, Flowing

In the plastic arts, the eyes that see images within turn outward to create in tandem with the hands. Much in the same way that the images seen in dreams symbolize ideational creativity, the hands often symbolize the creative act. So it is in northwest Zambia, where I heard basket makers report that their designs emerge "with the fingering," *kuminwe,* and so it is elsewhere in Africa. In Mali, Dogon sculptor Wagou Dara told Rachel Hoffman that his son "let his hands work instead of his brain," and when he did this, "the sculpture had a soul" (1995:57). Dogon sculptor Ibrahim Poudjougou explained to Hoffman that art is no matter of divine inspiration. "Poudjougou said that he himself was god-given; his sculpture, however, came not from god's hands but from his own. The magic that sometime occurred was, for the sculptor, a record of a moment of profound "wholeness" in *himself*" (1995:57). In Liberia, sculptor Zra told Hans Himmelheber that his "human hand" represented his life as a sculptor. Himmelheber reports: "At the end of our first interview, Zra pulled a bundle out of some corner and carefully unwrapped a beautiful ladle whose handle ended in a carved human hand. 'When this sickness came over me… I felt that this meant the end of my work. I wanted to carve one last big spoon. On it I carved my sculptor's hand, as it closes itself forever'" (1963:97).

Artists also know that the hands do not move alone. Basket makers in Zambia use their eyes to see and their fingers to weave, but other parts of their sensorimotor body are at play. They move their arms, torso, neck, and head in synchrony with their hands, all the while holding the plaiting mat in place on the ground with one foot. In coiling, women use their teeth to flatten the initial knot, they use the tip of their fingers to sense the malleability of the moistened threads, and I have seen some women fasten the ends of their strong root threads around their toes in order to stretch and smooth the threads.

To the ethnographer-cum-apprentice, these bodily movements, imposed by technical imperatives as well as the way these are molded by culture, are as foreign as the ideas behind them. Whereas the skilled body recedes from awareness as attention is focused upon the emerging form, the untrained body becomes "perspicuous by difficulty" (Leder 1990:31). It will also assert its physical presence and inescapable role in art making by causing pain. I learned this sooner than later (Figure 1). After a few days of plaiting in northwest Zambia, my neck and back ached from hours of bending forward, my hands burned from handling the rough warp splints, and previously-unnoticed hand and arm muscles felt sore from pulling sideway the bark-rope weavers. My learning to plait was a process of incorporation, a process of gradually and painfully bringing a new skill within the body (Leder 1990:31-32).

Figure 1. The author working on the rim of one of vaMutondo's winnowing trays. Because of back and neck pain caused by sitting on the ground with the legs outstretched for days, the author is sitting on a stool. Chavuma, Zambia, March 23, 1996. Photograph © Sónia Silva. All rights reserved.

In passing, it is not a coincidence that the issue of skill is often omitted in the classic literature on African art, or otherwise relegated to a secondary section on technique, raw materials, and tools, a section that typically follows the main section where the topics of ideational creativity and aesthetic standards are considered. The internal structure of publications often exhibits the same logocentric bias found in the text. Scholars clearly distinguish between creativity and technique. They often note with chagrin that sculptors in Africa tend to confuse the two, verbally reducing matters of artistic quality to matters of (mere) technique. Referring to the Chokwe people of southwest Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Daniel Crowley wrote in 1973: "The strictly aesthetic aspects of an object are not always clearly differentiated from the technical" (1973:228). Having conducted research in the same cultural region, I know what

Crowley meant. However, in the kind of approach that I am advocating here, technique is not the stepchild of creativity; technique is itself creative. Thick or thin, verbal descriptions of technique in response to the researcher's questioning amount to a culturally framed translation into the medium of words of what is always an embodied practice. Experientially, technique equals mind-body intentionality released upon a segment of the physical world (Ingold 2001:21). Technique equals art, knowledge, skill, flow.

My first day of apprenticeship to plaiting *(kuseleka)* went reasonably well. One of the greatest difficulties in plaiting is weaving the first line, but my Zambian master, vaMutondo (the prefix *va* denotes respect), kindly wove the first line of my *lwalo* (winnowing basket) (Figure 2). He chose the easiest of designs, *mijila* (paths or lines), a design composed of parallel diagonal lines. All I had to do was to pass the bark-rope weaver over and under the warp splints in a sequence of two-over and two-under. I did not smooth the edges of my weaving threads along the way and pull them tightly, but my plaiting mat, too small though it was to be used as a functional winnowing tray, was technically satisfactory; or so I surmised from vaMutondo's cheerful praise.

Figure 2. VaMutondo weaving a winnowing mat. Chavuma, Zambia, March 22, 1996. Photograph © Sónia Silva. All rights reserved.

My first obstacle came weeks later with my second *lwalo*. We had finished preparing our respective shares of cane splints and bark-rope rolls for the day's weaving, so my master instructed me to align and secure a small bunch of splints with my wooden, clip-like warp holder *(paji)*. I asked him, quite naturally I thought, if he could tell me the number of splints required for a "real" *lwalo*. Do not worry about numbers, he said.

Now plaiting seemed to me to be a highly precise exercise. I had read that basketry in Africa encodes complex geometrical and mathematical ideas, from the Pythagorean theorem and combinatorics to trigonometry (Gerdes 1999:55), so I surmised that some numerical precision was in order. Politely I asked again: would you please give me an exact figure? Concentrate on the weaving for now, you'll have the opportunity to add or remove splints later on, he said. Gathering my last bit of courage I asked if he would recommend a design more challenging than "lines," which I had mastered. Just start plaiting and the pattern *(wino)* will emerge, he said. I asked him what he meant. He said that as my fingers moved, I would see the pattern.

At this point, feeling lost and disheartened, I silently wished that I had brought a *lwalo* with me to serve as a model. I knew that basket weavers work from memory, but very clearly my memory and my fingers were unready. As an apprentice to basket making I felt at a loss; as an anthropologist though I had learned a valuable lesson: creativity is not only an idea; creativity is also an embodied act.

My anxiety and disorientation contrasted sharply with vaMutondo's confidence. He felt no need to know in advance the exact number of splints, and was not the least troubled, much less embarrassed, by the fact that he could not spell out the sequence of under-and-over stitches that he used in his designs.[4] He added or removed splints and undid finished lines as required, letting the design emerge "in the act of making," *mukutunga*. All in all he worked with playfulness, moderation, focus, and enjoyment. I came to the realization that vaMutondo's performance was not divided between alternating moments of visualization of inner images and replication of these images in material form. As he worked, inner images and material images seemed to fuse, enabling his complete focus on the emerging pattern, his adjusting of that pattern to the plaiting mat's size, his improvising along the way. VaMutondo's designs were most certainly part and parcel of the traditional repertoire; yet no two instances of the same design were perfectly alike.

In northwest Zambia, the designs that women make on coiled baskets *(jimbango)* also emerge in the process of weaving. And they are not alone in their practice of improvisation. Beauty Nxgonga, among the best known basket makers in KwaZulu-Natal, and Edna, her daughter, "do not plan the designs but develop them as they work, resulting in baskets with an integrity and perfection that are quite unique. Each basket can take up to two weeks to complete" (Sellschop et al. 2002:51). Bamana sculptor Kojuju drew Sarah C. Brett-Smith's attention to the element of uncertainty inherent in carving:

> You look at it as a simple block of wood first, but when you have sat down to reflect on what it should become—when you are sitting next to the wood, you will reflect. And then you will be able to say that it will become a man, but you can also arrive at a moment in your calculations where you will say, "Aaah! I will

> transform this into a woman." You will say that the character of a man has not appeared. It can be a defect in the wood itself or even in the process of carving. But if you decide to change the object into a woman, the error won't spoil anything. It's like this that one changes things. [Brett-Smith 1994:201]

Openness to improvisation and discovery during the creative process does not reflect poorly on the artist, quite the contrary. Pablo Picasso once said, *Je ne cherche pas, je trouve* (I do not search, I find) (Boden 2004:31). Henry Moore once wrote, "I sometimes begin a drawing with no preconceived problem to solve, with only the desire to use pencil on paper, and make lines, tones and shapes with no conscious aim; but as my mind takes in what is so produced a point arrives where some idea becomes conscious and crystallizes, and then a control and ordering begins to take place" (1952:72). In an interview dealing with the presence of language symbols in his paintings, Ethiopian modern artist Wosene Worke Kosfor once told Patricia DiRubbo: "In the studio, I'm always improvising. I don't think about what I want to print. I don't sketch it out beforehand. I move toward the [Amharic] symbol by negotiation with the canvas" (Worke Kosfor 2007:239). Speaking of his painting *Kissing Birds*, the Nigerian artist Prince Twins Seven-Seven once told Henry Glassie about his "mistakes." Glassie reports: "[Prince's] mistakes, like his free gestures among the patterns in woodgrain, provide new points of departure in the restless onrush of action. [Prince] accepts them and they remain, along with the designs he draws, in the finished product" (Glassie 2010:32). I think that Kojuju would probably agree with Prince Twins Seven-Seven, for he told Brett-Smith, very openly, that some decisions in carving have to be made when the artist "sits next to the wood," that "in the process of carving… one changes things," but that "[this] error won't spoil anything" (Brett-Smith 1994:201).

In some cases at least, could it be that the image seen within is more schematic than photographic? This would leave enough room for the creative work to continue, ideationally and bodily, during art making. The late Chokwe basket maker Chamwaza, whom I had the privilege to meet in Chavuma in the 1990s, once told me that what he saw inside were not photographs of his designs, but their *makumbilo*. The two-under and two-over stitches serve as fillers, he said; the *makumbilo,* meaning the three-over and four-over stitches, tie up the design *(kukasa wino)*. They are the nodes that hold the pattern together. It is because each named pattern is filled differently during the weaving that it both resembles and differs from other instantiations of the same pattern. If a design did not come out easily in the process of fingering, Chamwaza placed aside his materials and tried again later.

It may be that in the Cartesian view of things the mind and the body are at odds with one another, the body being the "handmaid of consciousness," forever condemned to mechanically execute movements first visualized in the mind (Merleau-Ponty 1962:139). But what Maurice Merleau-Ponty proclaims philosophically, and what vaMutondo, Chamwaza, Kojuju, Wagou Dara, Ibrahim Poudjougou, Zra, Beauty Nxgonga, Edna, Wosene Worke Kosfor, and Prince Twins Seven-Seven have all mentioned thus far, suggests indirectly that the body is itself a subject, and a creative one at that. The body is capable of acting and understanding the world directly, without recourse to the mind's symbolic function, a mode of practical knowledge that Merleau-Ponty calls *praktognosia* (Jackson 1996:32).[5]

The experience of *praktognosia* in art making is also well captured by the concept of *flow.* For social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow is the "peculiar dynamic state—holistic sensation that people feel when they act in total involvement," when action and awareness merge, when one's sense of self vaporizes and yet one is control. He elaborates: "In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future" (1975:36). It is possible that when Kojuju used the verb *ka bugubugu*, whose multiple semantic associations refer consistently to bodily actions, he meant to translate into words his experience of flow. In Brett-Smith's words:

> Kojuju uses the verb *ka bugubugu* to express the transfer of energy from the sculptor's hand and spirit to the carving…. When Kojuju says that the unsuccessful sculptor cannot *"bugubugu,"* he means that this artist cannot pour himself into his work, he has not given generously of himself without holding anything back…. The unsuccessful sculptor has been unable to achieve that rushing release of energy that creates a masterpiece swiftly and surely. [1994:166-167]

With disarming simplicity, the concept of flow captures the rushing release of energy that occurs in those moments of total involvement when the mind, the body, and the environment become one and whole.

Learning To Learn

Thus far I have argued that artistic creativity in Africa, and elsewhere, is never exhausted in an inner image or thought. Inner images and thoughts can most certainly be creative, but the creative process also unfolds during art making, when the body-mind creates in engagement with materials. I have also disclosed what I see as the tendency in the study of so-called traditional African art, and elsewhere, to value reason and its acolytes, sight and word. I have suggested that such tendency leads to concepts, publications and methodologies that are, *pari passu*, logocentric, the concept of creativity becoming an inner image or idea seen within a mental space, as mentioned; matters of technique being relegated to a secondary plane in the internal structure of publications; and formal and informal interviewing being privileged over more practical, hands-on methodologies.

The methodological consequences of logocentrism, however, demand further elaboration. Can we describe methodologies as logocentric? Are not methods just methods, the nets we use to catch our butterflies? They never are, and I would suggest that another message to be drawn from this essay is that methodological choices come with consequences.

I earlier described how during my apprenticeship to vaMutondo, caught off guard by a disorienting sense of bodily awkwardness and incompetence, I reached out to words. Although I knew—we all do—that mastery comes from practice and not from spelled out instructions, I

expected vaMutondo to reveal in words the master key to plaiting. I worried about the final product and tried to compensate for my practical ineptitude with the security of words and numbers, if not, as admittedly occurred to me at first, with thoughts of vaMutondo evidencing signs of poor knowledge. Numbers and words give a comforting sense of control, and I tried to learn plaiting the way I knew best. I asked specific questions and expected specific answers on the assumption that verbal instruction would magically produce manual mastery. Taking for granted that art making and the artwork are secondary to the thoughts and inner images that precede them, I favored a form of engagement in which the body is secondary to ideas and their verbal translation.

But I learned my lesson. By insisting on asking questions and being respectfully but firmly referred back to the act of weaving, I learned not only that creativity is both an idea and an embodied act, but also that embodied skills need not be verbalized in order to be learned. The famous weaver Dada Nwakwata, who lived in Akwete, Nigeria, in the 19th century, learned this the hard way, or so the legend has it. Dada Nwakwata always worked in the secrecy of her backyard lest her visitors might see her beautiful designs and verbally describe them to others. She only trusted her friend Ngbokwo, who was deaf and mute. In the end though Ngbokwo did give her designs away. Being deaf and mute, Ngbokwo did not describe them with words, as Dada Nwakwata's had feared others would do; she did it with her silent gestures and movements in the act of weaving (Aronson 2001:17-18).[6]

If art in Africa, and perhaps everywhere, is learned to a large degree through observation, imitation, and trial and error, which is to say by doing and incorporating the new skill, should not scholars redefine their fieldwork as a learning-how experience, in addition to a learning-that experience? Data should not only derive from detached observations and interviews, formal and informal; data should emerge in the process of engagement in practical activities. Not all structures of meaning and forms of intentionality are propositional in nature. Let us then not subjugate the bodily to the semantic, and then mistake our verbal mode of description for the sensory things described (Jackson 1989:122; Johnson 1987:4). True, we have eyes to see, brains to think, and mouths to speak; but we also have bodies to move, sense, feel, and act.

I am not claiming that scholars should not question the artists and note in writing their verbal descriptions of inner images. Not only do visual experiences lead more easily to verbalization than the experiences of the sensorimotor body, suggesting that in this case interviewing is fitting, but some artists do offer verbal accounts of their embodied experiences of creativity, as shown in this essay.[7] Neither am I claiming that observation- and interview-based research is politically fraught in the larger context of the world's asymmetries. Although logocentric methodologies may potentially threaten coevalness, the actual form of their deployment by individual researchers in particular historical circumstances remains indeterminate. How else to explain the political role ascribed by scholars to their logocentric portrayal of African sculptors as cerebral, methodical, and poised, qualities highly valued in academia, in the larger struggle to debunk racism? I mean here the racist view that Africa is to the West like the body is to the mind in Cartesian dualism—the handmaid of consciousness, forever prisoner of the senses and emotions.[8]

Today, however, we must ask the lingering question: is there a need to exclude the body and the senses from our studies of creativity? African artists may be rational, but are they Cartesian dualists? We have seen that artists in Africa, like artists everywhere, are neither pure mind nor pure body; they are a mind-body totality fully engaged in creative work, now flowing and improvising, now stepping back for critical appraisal.

My trust in apprenticeship as a powerful methodology in the study of creativity comes from personal experience (Figure 3). In interview, I relied upon sight and intellect and attempted to learn a skill through the inadequate means of words; in apprenticeship, I was constantly reminded of the primacy of the body in the creative process, and offered the unique opportunity to learn how basket makers learn (Goody 1989:255).[9] This does not mean that one needs to master the art—I never did. I never reached the transformational point in which my body developed a keen sensitivity to form, proportion, and decoration. But it was through apprenticeship that I learned this—that learning basket making is less dependent upon explicit verbal instruction than upon doing, practicing, and incorporating.[10]

Figure 3. The author's husband displaying the author's second winnowing tray. This basket is decorated with the design *tumbuli twavafu*, 'knees of the dead.' Chavuma, Zambia, April 9, 1996. Photograph © Sónia Silva. All rights reserved.

Equally important, I also learned that apprenticeship has the potential to redefine the relationship between the researcher and the informant. On their own, detached from an experiential context to ground them, observation and interviewing turn artists into objects—disoriented informants who

try their best to answer questions even as they wonder what in the world the researcher is after. Apprenticeship reverses the relation between researchers and their informants. Whereas in interview researchers remain in relative control, if not politically, then epistemologically, now it is they who are ignorant and must struggle to engage and find their way in an alien environment that they know little and do not control. Michael Coy captures this nicely when he says that the classic participant observer is a "detached participant" whereas the apprentice is an engaged participant (1989:127). The social, cultural, and technological context of apprenticeship forces the researcher to move from an *informative* frame of mind, plagued by the ills of detachment and hierarchy, to a *performative* one where knowledge emerges from the coeval give and take of an interpersonal encounter defined in local terms (Fabian 1999:27-28). What is given and taken is not only abstract knowledge and points of view, but also, actions, gestures, movements, and sensations. What is found in this give and take is a common ground.

As scholars, we are historically predisposed to learn, not *with* others, but *from* them. But history moves on. May my revisit to the seminal literature on artistic creativity in Africa have revealed in a new light the groundbreaking work that has been done, and persuaded you that the time is ripe to take another step.

Keywords

Ability, Africa, *Apprentices* [Apprenticeship], *Art*, *Basket Making*, *Body*, *Creativity*, *Interviewing*, Logocentrism, *Mind*, *Research—Theory and Methodology*, Skill, Visualism. Keywords in italics are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on research funded by the Smithsonian Institution, Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (Portugal), and Skidmore College. I thank Lisa Aronson, Laura Cochrane, Michael Ennis-McMillan, Silvia Forni, Christraud Geary, Joanna Grabski, Gabriel Herrera, Jason Baird Jackson, Sydney Kasfir, Carol Magee, Mary Nooter Roberts, and Allen Roberts for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. I am equally indebted to those who anonymously reviewed my essay and those whose editorial work supports *Museum Anthropology Review* as a not-for-profit, open access journal in the collective interest.

Notes

1. For a critique of visualism, see Fabian 1983 and Jay 1994.

2. Think here of freewriting, the embodied act of writing freely in order to get ideas for writing.

3. For a critique of the deep-rooted, slanted dualism art vs. craft in its many permutations—creativity and repetition, mind and body, art and technology—see Blier 1988-1989 and Ingold

2001. In this essay, my unapologetic description of basket making as art (see also Silva 2003) and my frequent juxtaposition of skilled practices more often distinguished as art and craft are not gratuitous. Because the opposition art/craft is reproduced both within art and within craft, these entrenched categories lead head-on to the paradoxical conclusion that art is craft ("a component of technology" [Gell 1992:43] and a domain of replication) and craft is art (a domain of creativity). I evade this bind by acknowledging, both in concept and terminology, the core identity between art and craft as skillful enactments and material forms.

4. For similar apprenticeship experiences in which verbal instruction is sparse and numerical ratios are minimal or entirely lacking, see for example Ruth Bunzel's work among San Ildefonso Pueblo potters (1969:8) and Shawn Lindsay's apprenticeship to drumming in Bloomington, Indiana (1996:206-207).

5. Key contributions to the study of embodiment are Csordas 1994, Jackson 1989, Johnson 1987, Leder 1990, and Merleau-Ponty 1962. On the trilogy mind-body-environment, see Hallam and Ingold 2007 and Marchand 2010. On the senses, see Howes 2003, Paterson 2007, and Stoller 1989, 1997.

6. I thank Lisa Aronson for bringing this legend to my attention.

7. For a discussion of the potential as well as limitations of narration and interviewing in African art, see Grabski and Magee in press.

8. Similarly, in *A Vez dos Cestos/ Time for Baskets*, I argue that the original team of the National Museum of Ethnology in Lisbon, Portugal, particularly Veiga de Oliveira and Benjamin Pereira, used "African Art" to fight the racist prejudices of the mid-twentieth century Portuguese society (Silva 2003:40-46, 145-148).

9. On African systems of apprenticeship, including workshop apprenticeships, see Lave 2011 and Kasfir and Förster in press.

10. On the value of apprenticeship as a research methodology, see Bunzel 1969, Coy 1989, Lindsay 1996, Marchand 2009, and Stoller and Olkes 1989. Ethnomusicologists have a long tradition of methodological and theoretical reflection on, and debate about, what they identify as bi-musicality, that is, becoming, during the fieldwork process, fluent or at least competent in the music making practices being studied. I am cognizant that there are situations and cultural settings in which art researchers might not be welcome to participate in the "doing" of an expressive practice, even when they might be encouraged to study it through observation and interviews. Jason Baird Jackson (letter to the author, March 1, 2012) has suggested that there are situations of this sort in Native North America. See also my work with basket diviners in northwest Zambia (Silva 2011:14).

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Editor's Note: Studies of African societies presented in past issues of Museum Anthropology Review *include C. Kurt Dewhurst, Narissa Ramdhani, and Marsha MacDowell's (2008) "Lessons Lived and Learned in Developing and Managing a Bi-National Cultural Heritage Sector Project in South Africa" and Sabine Marschall's (2008) Ncome–Monument and Museum as "Critical Response". Issues of creativity are addressed in Samuel K. Parker's (2009) "Renovation, Disposal, and Conservation of Hindu Temples and Images: The Institutionalization of Creativity in South Indian and American Art World" and contemporary basketry practices are taken up by Elizabeth A. Kallenback's (2009) "The California Indian Basketweavers Association: Advocates for the Use of Museum Collections by Contemporary Weavers."*