



ERVAIS FOTSO NOUMSI

Ervais Fotso currently serves as a Bible translation strategy adviser for Scriptura under the project Psalms Layer by Layer. Prior to this, he spent nearly a decade with CABTAL. He has been a Bible translation consultant since 2017 and holds a Master of Biblical Studies with a minor in Bible translation from the Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary, Ndu. Currently, he is a World Arts PhD candidate at Dallas International University. He has published numerous articles and presented papers at Bible translation conferences, and his areas of interest include Bible translation, oral Bible translation, and ethnodoxology.

Introduction

Art is not created in isolation from its social context (Beaudry 2008, 229). This fundamental ethnographic reality became evident during my study of wood sculpture in the vicinity of Yaoundé, the capital city of Cameroon. As an observer-participant, I had the privilege of gaining direct insight from the field. I believe, not only from the readings we engaged in during our course,¹ that learning any foreign art tradition is at least a threefold process: understanding the social context, knowing the artists, and comprehending the art in its performances. This article examines how these three key aspects, which constitute a complex, interrelated, and integrated system, present a challenge for learning a new art tradition. In my paper, I offer some introductory content and then present key findings.

My Personal Biases

“I brought to this endeavor many personal attributes that no doubt influenced its results” Capper (2020, WP22). The cosmopolitan context and background of Yaoundé, the capital city of Cameroon, where I grew up, preclude me from viewing sculpture solely through the lens of African Traditional Religion. My Western education significantly shapes the lenses through which I perceive and interpret the world.

As a trained Baptist pastor of the Cameroonian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ndu, my Christian life and pastoral calling have shaped my approach during this field experience. Despite the resurgence of “fake men of God” in the Cameroonian context (Tamfu 2016), people generally exhibit a sense of grace toward religious ministers and exercise caution when interacting with them.

As a Bible translation consultant, I was prompted to contemplate ways in which sculpture and my personal learning journey could contribute to the Bible translation movement, particularly in the area of ethnodoxology.² For example, I have the strong conviction that sculpture is a powerful tool for the translated Scripture to permeate the lives of individuals.

¹ This paper was written as part of the Directed Practicum in World Arts course offered at the Dallas International University, Spring 2025.

² “Ethnodoxology is the theological and anthropological study, and practical application, of how every cultural group might use its unique and diverse artistic expressions appropriately to worship the God of the Bible” (Global Ethnodoxology Network 2019).

Bimusicality and Artistic Bilingualism

In a seminal article, Mantle Hood (1960, 55) introduces the concept of bimusicality, observing that “the Western musician who wishes to study Eastern music or the Eastern musician who is interested in Western music faces the challenge of ‘bi-musicality.’” The concept of artistic bilingualism expands bimusicality to encompass the challenge of adapting one’s acquired habits to embrace a new set of behaviors in learning any foreign art form.

What Is Sculpture?

In essence, sculpture is the process of carving, putting objects together, or molding. It entails transforming an initial material, such as wood, metals, or paper, into a meaningful shape. This involves gradually building up the sculpture through modeling or strategically removing unnecessary parts (Rawson 2016, 17). For this research, I concentrated on wood sculpture.

The wood sculpture I observed and studied can be categorized as “wasting” (Rawson 2016, 40), which involves removing superfluous parts from an initial piece of wood until it achieves the desired shape. Additionally, this sculpture incorporates elements of “assemblage” (Rawson 2016, 40), where the artist combines various materials to create a piece that is both functional and aesthetically pleasing, capable of being displayed and hung after completion.

The Methodology

During my fieldwork, I opted to avoid formal interviews, as I anticipated their ineffectiveness, particularly in a setting where individuals might feel intimidated before a microphone. Instead, I favored informal discussions, which allowed me to engage in open and closed questions with both my mentors and their colleagues.

As a participant observer, I meticulously documented my experiences and reflections in a journal. However, I also used my phone to capture numerous photographs and videos, which provided me with an extensive data repository. This enabled me to record both my own performances and those of my mentors during our sessions. I ensured that I recorded my reflections promptly upon leaving the sculpture workshop, particularly when I was concerned about overlooking crucial issues or points.

My readings significantly influenced my learning and documentation process. I gained valuable insights from the students’ comments and the teacher’s guidance. Given that our class was fully online, the online, virtual connection to other students and the teacher played a pivotal role in my learning journey. Furthermore, my research incorporated additional relevant literature beyond the course material.

The Context

The challenges I encountered as a learner were significantly influenced by the urban environment of Yaoundé, the capital city of Cameroon. I am fortunate to have acquired an art form in the city where I grew up, speaking French with my mentors. I was familiar with the neighborhoods, knew how to obtain information, and could connect with many issues raised by my mentors. As Harper (2018, 94) suggests, ethnography is initially conceived as the in-depth study of a defined space, where the researcher establishes profound relationships with the individuals being studied. Ethnographers actively participate, observe, communicate, and, to some extent, gain the perspective of their research partners. Harper further emphasizes the significance of paying particular attention to places and people in ethnographic research.

Yaoundé is the capital of Cameroon, with a population of 2,481,301 inhabitants.³ It is a cosmopolitan city, home to Cameroonians from various regions and approximately 250 tribes. Many residents of the city have adopted a highly urban lifestyle that significantly differs from the country's rural areas.

Traditionally, sculpture holds a pivotal role and serves as a key element in African Traditional Religion (ATR) practices, contrasting with the approach of my mentors. The social environment in Yaoundé has transformed sculpture into a commercial enterprise, characterized by mass production and practiced in challenging conditions. This context has shaped my learning experience and my development toward artistic bilingualism.

Commercial

The primary objective of my sculptor mentors is to generate income from their artistic endeavors, which inadvertently relegated beauty to a secondary purpose. This phenomenon can be attributed to the challenging economic circumstances prevalent in our city. Some of the sculptors encountered during my research exhibited a lack of passion and vocational drive. Within this context, selling has become an essential means of livelihood, presenting additional challenges to sculptors. First, sculptors require specific skills to successfully engage in sales.⁴ Second, sculptors must develop strategies to maximize their profits. Lastly, selling can be a significant source of frustration. In Cameroon, art is generally not accorded significant value, which has implications for sales. Furthermore, sculptors are often exploited by individuals who exhibit and sell their artworks. These sellers tend to purchase at the lowest possible cost, leaving sculptors upset and discouraged.⁵ As a learner, I was influenced by this commercial orientation. For instance, my mentors were unavailable when they were required to sell their work. During my final project, my mentor was absent due to his preparations for a trip to Kribi, a city in the south region of Cameroon, to engage in sales.

Mass Production

Mass production poses a significant concern, as sculptors strive to meet the demands of their market while also seeking to maximize profits. They find themselves in a competitive environment that compels each individual to produce as much as possible. This tendency toward mass production manifests in at least three distinct levels. To achieve the objective of mass production, sculptors use various electric tools and resources to expedite their work. Furthermore, collaboration and delegation are evident in the daily operations of the sculptors. I have observed a tendency among sculptors to work together and delegate tasks, allowing them to focus on specific areas of expertise and responsibilities. Lastly, sculptors produce a limited range of objects. This strategic approach enables them to concentrate effectively on the market's specific demands and requirements. They tend to have a fixed set of models,⁶ such as keyrings, which were regularly carved and mastered by sculptors. For instance,



³ See <https://yaounde.cm/>.

⁴ From a Cameroonian traditional perspective, selling requires a lot of bargaining. The first time I met Eric, my mentor, he was selling his artwork.

⁵ I remember that Eric mentioned a man that is renown among sculptors for buying cheap and selling very expensive. Many sculptors had to go to him because he was rich. Eric dreamed of the day when this man will no longer treat sculptors so poorly. Every time he talked about this, I felt his frustration.

⁶ During my discussion with Daniel, one of my mentors, I asked him why they tend to carve only some animals (lion, elephant, giraffes). He told me this is what people like and buy. He admitted that in Morocco, the situation was different, and people like all kinds of animals.

Cyrille, a sculptor, shared his goal of producing forty maps by the end of the day. I saw this remarkable goal achieved through mechanical repetition of the same gestures.

Working in Harsh, Hostile Conditions



The city faces numerous challenges, including limited and expensive land, which significantly impacts sculptors. They struggle to secure suitable workspaces and secure access to adequate workshops. One of our initial meetings was canceled due to a council appointment for my mentors, who were required to submit a document for a new site proposed by the ministry for sculptors. Among these challenges, three stand out.

The first challenge is electricity, which poses a major concern for both sculptors and the city. Many of our sessions were disrupted by power outages, forcing sculptors to either cease carving or rely on power-free assets and tools, which can have detrimental effects on their work.

Another critical concern I observed during my apprenticeship was security. Sculptors lacked the necessary equipment, including work uniforms, gloves, appropriate footwear, glasses, and even a toilet. The proximity of street children further heightened the security concerns, leading to frequent police patrols. These conditions made me wonder whether this was the ideal environment for my artistic development. During one session, an electric cable short-circuited, and while I panicked, my two mentors remained composed and demonstrated familiarity with handling such situations. One of them successfully opened the distributor and resolved the issue, allowing work to resume without interruption. This constant exposure to potential risks appears to be a critical concern for their artistic practice.

The final challenge I'll highlight is hygiene. How is sculpting possible in the absence of toilets or running water? Sculptors rely on inexpensive restaurants that do not guarantee safety, hygiene, or an adapted and balanced diet. I purchased my water and, upon forgetting to do so, had to spend my session without drinking, due to my lack of trust in the water available around me.

Working in the context of these conditions presented a significant challenge to my artistic bilingualism. But being artistically bicultural means being able to do the art within the real context of the culture. The recurring frustrations they caused for my mentors and myself effectively halted the learning process.

The People



After reading Beaudry,⁷ I made a conscious effort to prioritize my mentors as human beings. I had two mentors: Eric, on the left in the picture, and Daniel, on the right. While I never forgot my primary objective of learning and growth, I ensured that the human element was not overlooked.

As noted by Daynes and Williams (2018, 73), “Once we’re in, indeed, the most important task is to build trust and to develop close relationships with some key participants—sometimes called main informants, or privileged informants.”

⁷ My experience in the field corroborates this statement from Beaudry (2008, 229): “I began to understand that human relationships rather than methodology determined the quantity and the quality of the information gathered.”

During my field experience, I believed that maintaining positive relationships with my mentors was a crucial component of my success. Being rejected as a person would have been detrimental to my learning journey. Similarly, I was able to collaborate with them only because I did not feel intimidated by their presence. Investing in learning was intrinsically linked to investing in the human factor.

The human factor, as I observed in my mentoring process, can be characterized as dynamic, evolving, and nurtured. It was dynamic because my relationships with my mentors were reciprocal and shaped by time and circumstances. For instance, when I traveled to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), my mentors sent me WhatsApp messages. This communication presented an opportunity for our relationships to strengthen. At times, I acted, and at times, I reacted, with time serving as our ally.

The human factor also evolved; it began modestly and grew as we interacted. It required patience and resilience. To this day, it continues to develop. Lastly, I can describe the human factor as nurtured. Our relationship resembled a project that necessitated a multifaceted investment without which positive outcomes were unlikely. Like my mentors, I invested time, money, and emotional energy, among other resources. The result, in my perspective, was well worth the effort and investment.

Describing the human factor as dynamic, evolving, and nurtured highlights the complexity in which artistic bilingualism is created and the challenges that individuals face when attempting to learn foreign art. Furthermore, this pattern was underpinned by the principles of vulnerability, trust, and empathy.

Vulnerability

My sculpture learning did not precede our mutual acquaintance; rather, it followed, fostering collaborative growth. My relationship with my mentors commenced amid the uncertainties and concerns inherent in interactions between two strangers. Neither party was prepared to disclose their vulnerabilities to an individual who could potentially exploit them in the future. The possibility of encountering individuals with criminal backgrounds loomed large.

Initially, we engaged in a basic introduction, exchanging names and other pertinent information. Their vulnerability encompassed both personal and collective aspects. Eric, my primary mentor, was single and resided in Yaoundé, which presented specific challenges, including dietary. Daniel, my other mentor, was married, thereby assuming responsibilities toward his family. Both were Christians, and their ethical principles aligned with mine, facilitating their willingness to share their artistic creations with me.

Gradually, both mentors shared their frustrations as sculptors working in Yaoundé: The appreciation for their art was lacking, and the state failed to provide the necessary conducive environment. Over time, they revealed their aspiration to travel overseas, where they would be recognized and valued for their work. Daniel had already traveled to Morocco and was confident that this endeavor would be advantageous for their careers. During one of our informal conversations, Eric mentioned his late brother, who had introduced him to the world of sculpture. Tragically, this brother had passed away in a car accident, and Eric assumed the role of the workshop's head. This emotional revelation signaled a heightened level of vulnerability on his part.

Ultimately, Eric demonstrated his openness by requesting my financial assistance of 5,000 CFA (approximately 10 USD). Although this modest sum represented a significant step forward in our relationship, it underscored the great progress that had been made.

Trust

Trust is paramount in the realm of human relationships. As Sanjay Hamal (2020, 104) rightly points out, establishing trust in ethnographic research presents a formidable challenge that demands significant time and effort. However, this process becomes even more arduous when the researcher perceives or is perceived by the participants as being distinct from them in terms of cultural background, language, ethnicity, and other relevant factors. During the initial stages of my training, I recall a series of polite, courteous titles Eric used with me, such as “Sir,” “Pastor,” and “Father.” Subsequently, he effortlessly transitioned to using the term “mon frère” (“my brother”). Trust played a pivotal role in my training journey. The participants placed their trust in me and introduced me to their community of practice. They extended their trust even before providing me with their tools and continued to hold my hands as they guided me through the acquisition of essential skills.

Empathy

When Eric informed me about the electricity challenge, I offered him 30,000 Franc CFA (approximately 50 USD). Subsequently, I observed that he consistently offered me a soda during our sessions, while simultaneously purchasing a bottle of beer for himself. Empathy facilitates our perception of each other as human beings (Aerts, Pinxten, and Wallerstein 2011, 126), recognizing our shared fundamental and essential needs. As we nurtured empathy, it contributed to a more secure learning environment. During my trip to the DRC, Eric repeatedly inquired about my safety. I recall expressing to him that I was preoccupied with completing my final project. His willingness to assist and create a conducive environment demonstrated the progress of our relationship. He recognized me as a human in need of his support and proactively sought assistance from other sculptors. “When truly looking deeper into people’s lives, behaviours and experiences, we need to tap into arguably the most important skill in our research toolkit, our emotions. And, most crucially, our empathy” (Kirk n.d.).

Chatting and messaging apps played a key role, not in our practical skill learning but in our human relationships dimension. This is explained by the fact that distance was not an issue, all of us living in Yaoundé. We communicated through WhatsApp about what can be termed “personal,” except when we had to make a specific appointment. Daynes and Williams, sharing their experience, point out that “The lament of the ethnographer exiting after a long stint in the field is a classic narrative” (2018, 74). For me, the end of my project did not mean the end of my relationship with my mentors. As I am writing, Eric texted me to discuss a recent trip he had undertaken. This indicates the relationships we have established and anticipate maintaining in the days to come. Artistic bilingualism emerges within the context of human relationships.

The Process

One of the greatest joys of this journey was the maps I was able to carve as my final project. The performative dimension cannot be replicated in the scenery. Performance requires habituation of the body and mind, which tend to resist the new and the unfamiliar. The first time I attempted to carve maps using an electric tool, my hand vibrated for two days. My fingers became heavy, dirty, and I felt exhausted after an hour—to the great surprise of my mentors, who were less muscular than me. My body attempted to adjust, but my brain “overheated” as I struggled to follow the instructions.

The sitting position caused me some back pain. My eyes were affected by dust, and I had to use eye drops. The discomfort of artistic bilingualism was at its peak with those tools in my hands. As time progressed, however, my



muscles and other systems adjusted. Art encompasses creativity and aesthetics, but at the early stages of apprenticeship, these aspects hold minimal significance. Three aspects made performance challenging: tools, techniques, and shape.

The Tools



The performance was executed using a specialized set of tools, the absence of which rendered wood sculpture an impossible endeavor. These tools encompassed both manual and electrical components. Initially, my primary challenge manifested in the peculiar task of operating the electric tools. During my first attempt, I inadvertently laid down the tool after switching it off with the blade of the electric carving wheel still in motion. This incident served as a vivid moment that imparted a valuable lesson. The subsequent challenge lay in my ability to wield the tools effectively for carving and creating. This entailed moving them with either gentle or swift movements, while simultaneously maintaining a stable or unstable

position for the wood. Notably, the first time I employed the sculpting scissors, I inadvertently confused the correct position, resulting in an unfortunate waste of wood. It is evident that these tools were not mere objects but rather entities with distinct names, roles, and functions. My cognitive abilities have yet to fully assimilate all these nomenclatures. Mastering a foreign art form, akin to a musician mastering his instrument, requires mastery of the tools.

Each of the three main challenges of the sculpture process—tools, techniques, and shapes—involves specific aspects that must be understood to achieve mastery. Each tool has a name, a function, and instructions on how to use it. Each technique has a name, specific steps of sculpting that involve it, and the set of tools required for it. Lastly, shapes can be living or nonliving, and the object sculpted can be in motion or static. Some shapes, like the one called “le penseur” (“the thinker”), have specific names.

The Right Techniques

The techniques used in an art form are pivotal for analysis (Schrag and Rowe 2020, 30). While proficiency in these tools was essential, each artistic piece also required a series of specific steps and techniques. The right technique means using the right tools well. Among the most intricate techniques employed was assemblage. I had to use various glues and gluing methods, each tailored to address specific challenges. To acquire proficiency in these techniques, I needed a comprehensive understanding of their names, sequential steps, and associated tools.

The Shapes

Eric told me more than once that a piece of wood tells you the object to carve. He had no trouble visualizing the forms and objects to determine potential carving subjects and then executing them with precision. I still struggle with this proficiency. I had previously observed that the sculptor’s eye is not only a useful tool but also as a crucial indicator of progress. As the carving progressed, I noticed my mentors occasionally pause, lift the object, and examine it with a slight tilt of their heads. Subsequently, they would assess whether a step had been completed. This ability demands time and unwavering perseverance.

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