

MUSIC BEFORE LANGUAGE: OBSERVATIONS FROM A HUNTER-GATHERER'S POINT OF VIEW

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If language evolved when humanity lived in Africa as hunter-gatherers, then what might African hunter-gatherers have to tell us about the evolutionary relationship between music and language? The BaYaka's view of the human communicative spectrum extends from using plants to signal, signing and animal mimicry, through a range of human languages and linguistic devices, to the employment of music, dance and other performative strategies. Unfettered by standardisation or identity concerns, BaYaka are communicative predators, prioritising efficacy in their techniques for communicating with a diversity of human and non-human sentient and responsive elements of their environment. Different but complementary, these modes of communication are designed for a range of audiences. At one end, signing and speech are for an individual to communicate to others, while singing in musicking groups is intended to facilitate group level communication at the other.

Taking a reverse anthropology approach, Bayaka women's reasons for singing suggest a behavioural ecology explanation for the prior emergence of music. The ethnography suggests that musical ritual sufficiently respects costly signalling constraints to provide the key scaffolds required for language: capacities for vocal dexterity and vocal learning while participation stimulates we-intentionality, so enabling normativity to develop. These are key building blocks for the emergence of language.