Chapter 5

Participating in African Popular Culture as a Researcher: A Case of Becoming a Karioki Performer in Uganda

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Abstract: African popular culture studies examine social relations. In the present study, I investigated how African urban stage performances are created and studied African urban social relationships. Previous studies have analysed the formation of groups, performance items, body action and messages expressed by popular culture to investigate social relations. However, when studying these actual relations, I would emphasise the significance of watching people enjoy and consume popular culture. This article demonstrates a research methodology to that effect; namely, whereby a researcher "becomes a performer", and is enabled to practically observe the practices of people's engagement in popular culture. The target popular culture of this article is karioki, which is performed on stages of restaurants and bars in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. The stage performance is played with music and involves mainly young performers, whereas audience include people of all ages and both sexes. In this study, I thoroughly explain my own experience of becoming a karioki performer in 2011, while also reporting on interviews and observation research that were done before I became a performer. Finally, this study examines the value of conducting research as a performer.

Keywords: Popular culture, Participant observation, Social relations, Performance, Interactions

1. Introduction: Approach Social Relations from Popular Culture Studies

I have studied stage performance in urban Africa. The main target performance, known as karioki, is played on stages in restaurants and bars in Kampala, Uganda. Its performers and audience are mostly youth. However, the admittance fee is cheap and the actual audience often involves both men and women, young and old. Karioki is a popular and well-known type of performance in this society. We can call it a part of Kampala's popular culture.

In African studies, since colonial times, new sub-cultures developed in urban area have attracted scholars' attention. The sub-cultures that many people enjoy are generally called "popular culture", such as music, dance, theatre, radio drama, TV shows, movies and magazines. Jegede (1986) considers theatre, music, mass media, paints and religion as African popular culture and concludes that they are related to each other and inseparable (1986: 276-277): "Together they form an exciting collage of influences from the past and present and of alien and indigenous concepts which have been internalized and used". He summarises (Id: 277): "in its own way popular culture, especially in the cities, thus celebrates the resilience and adaptability of African societies". Directly and indirectly, African popular culture reflects the urban social conditions and people's values.

Therefore, to study social relations constructed in urban Africa, urban popular culture has often been the object of research. For example, Mitchell (1956) analysed dance performances in towns of Northern Rhodesia (current Zamia) during the colonial period. He found that a new concept of "tribe" appeared as one of the categories in urban areas. Ranger (1975) analysed dance association in historical contexts and discovered that people formed an expansive dance network, beyond cities and ethnic groups, which was influenced by social changes throughout the history of Tanzania. Tsuruta (2000; 2003) studied the same phenomenon by focusing on members of jazz bands and soccer teams. Suzuki (2000) reported that one can enter youth groups on the street by learning body action and dance inspired by mass media information in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. Dolby (2006) indicated that there is an "African" public space that exceeds the border of single nation-states by focusing on the success of a certain television show and analysing messages collected on the show's website from its audience, the television staffs and others.

These studies demonstrate flexibility in the creation of networks and groups in the urban areas of Africa. In these previous studies, however, limited attention was paid to the actual practices of people enjoying their popular culture, like the audiences and performers. The objects of performance formed the main focus of these analyses, such as body action, and the messages expressed by people through popular culture. However, people's practices during on-site enjoyment of popular culture are meaningful for research on social relations, because only in practice one can observe how people relate to each other in that society. I have endeavoured to be present at actual scenes where popular culture is enjoyed. During the stage performance, I observed people's practices in detail, especially from the performers' perspective. In the process of this research, I therefore became a performer.

This article shows how the research method of "becoming a performer" is applicable for studies on social relations through investigating how popular culture is enjoyed by people. In this study, I explain my experiences and discoveries during the two different periods of my research, before and after becoming a performer. When I, a Japanese, "became a performer" on stage in Africa, audiences regarded me as a white person, not as African, as my skin colour remains an unchangeable factor no matter how often I perform together with Africans. However, as many anthropologists have experienced through participant researches, I expected that something could be obtained through physical sense. My study examines the events that occurred between the researcher and target people and, subsequently, analyses their social relations. Becoming a performer is a productive method. In reference to this, the performance theorist Margaret Thompson Drewal suggests in her article on the methodology of performance studies in Africa (1991: 35): "To involve oneself in the productions of performance means learning the techniques and style, and above all, learning to improvise". If one obtains the ability to improvise, "There is in that case mutual and interactive production between fieldworkers and other performers, researcher and researched, (…) so that fieldworkers can become the objects of performers' researches" (Id: 35). This gives significance to "a researcher becoming a performer".

2. Research Target: Stage Performance, Karioki

This paragraph explains my research target, known as karioki. It is performed at night on the stage of restaurants and bars in the capital city of Uganda, Kampala. In the late 1990s, young people started to sing and dance at the restaurants and bars with karaoke machines. One could say that karioki is named after this phenomenon. However, karioki is different from karaoke, which originated in Japan and has since spread across the world. Although karioki performance is played to music, there is no live singing, which is very important to karaoke.

Karioki consists primarily of three items: "mime", "dance" and "comedy". "Mime" represents singing without actual vocalization, using body movement and lip-synching for expression. "Dance" represents moving the body to music. Movements are sometimes choreographed when several performers dance together. However, at other times the dancing is impromptu. "Comedy" resembles "mime", but tends to rely more on playful body movements and humorous performances than on the expression of singing a song. Karioki is created through an arrangement of these three items. Up to 30-50, sometimes

even 70, songs are played at one karioki show. The length of one song is 3-10 minutes, which means that one karioki show runs for 3-4 hours. Every time there is a shift between songs, the performers or the performance items are changed.

Karioki is very popular amusement. Needless to say, other stage performances are held in Kampala, including musician concerts, comedian shows and theatre performances of up to 3 hours long. However, the entrance fees for most performances are expensive, and most ordinary people cannot afford them. On the other hand, the karioki fee is the price of a drink, or it is free of charge entirely; therefore, people of middle or low income can enjoy it easily. The audience is mainly young, but during holidays children and elderly people can also be observed.

Since 2006, I have stayed in Kampala for almost 2 consecutive years to study karioki. My main research purpose is to reveal the social relations of the people who enjoy karioki through analysing their interactions during the process of performance-making, including the actual stage performances, rehearsals and daily practices.

Picture 1. Karioki performance (Group dance by boys, 2010)

3. Research before Becoming a Performer
This section reports the research that was conducted before I became a karioki performer. It took a long time to become a performer and, as such, to make participant observations. I began my research on karioki more than a year ago. Prior to becoming a performer, I conducted interviews and observation research.

The Difficulties in Developing Research through Questions
At the beginning of my research, I concentrated on gathering information that could be easily obtained by asking questions. Every time I went to watch karioki, I obtained contact details of the performers and visited multiple restaurants and bars to interview the managers. I asked simple questions to the performers regarding their profiles, and to the managers regarding their management conditions. Through these interviews, the following could be understood: performers tend to be young, in their mid-teens to twenties with diverse social backgrounds, including their ethnic and educational backgrounds. Although they formed groups to play karioki, the memberships were non-committal. Restaurants and bars decide which group is to perform on a specifics day of the week, but there are no printed contracts and the performance venues can exchange groups easily when certain performance items or the performers' behaviour do not meet their criteria; consequently, few groups continue to play at the same place for very long. In brief, karioki performances are fluid about performers' membership as well as venues.

Next, I tried to be present among performers as long as possible, to listen to their usual conversations and to observe their activities. Performers neither objected to me nor invested in socialising with me. Some groups were formed by youths, while other were organised by people with economic power, like bar owners. I chose two karioki groups that differed from one another in how they had been formed and spent time with them as much as possible, as I was under the impressions that this would enable me to study the activities of the groups and their members' daily lives. However, as it turned out, each member of the groups I had selected had different homes and they did not share their daily lives. Some members had their own families and others had daytime jobs. It was difficult to spend time with them continuously and to build a good relationship. When I asked questions, they answered, but my ability of speaking the local language was not enough incentive to engage in daily conversations. After they answered my questions, I could not develop any further conversations. When my interviews were over, I would become quiet. It was difficult to enjoy these

conversations, and I could not develop friendships with the performers.

The Achievement of Interview and Observation, and the Potential of Participant Research

Considering improvements for my research, I started to observe the performers' activity when they were performing from backstage without interacting with them and recorded their activities in field notes. Karioki performers always prepare programs for their shows. First, the performer with the longest tenure in the group writes down details about the items to be performed and of the performers' names in a notebook or on paper. Afterwards, every member writes his/ her song next to his/ her name. About 10 minutes before the show starts, the program is brought to the DJ box at the venue, where a male DJ plays music from a computer.

However, the program that is decided before the show is subject to abrupt changes, as the show proceeds with equal abruptness. Throughout, there are many changes in the order of items, performance items, performers and songs. This was surprising to me, based on my own theatre experience in Japan. When I was doing theatre acting in Japan, the regular method was for performers to fulfil the predetermined program without changing the contents. If last minute changes had to be made, this would be communicated among the cast and crew to be dealt with it properly. Conversely, a predetermined karioki program can change spontaneously on the actual stage. It is impossible to predict what will happen with the program that was decided before the show. I recorded what was written in programs before shows and subsequently what was actually performed on stage, and analysed the process of how the programs were changed. I asked the performers why they changed their programs after every show, expecting to find out what aspects were important for them when performing karioki. However, the answers they gave were so diverse that a common policy among karioki performers could not be determined. These answers included: "because the venue requested", "I just feel like it", or "I got tired at that time". Moreover, most performers expressed disgust at my question.

As the result of this observational and simple interview research, I found that performers responded flexibly to and did not mind changes of an already decided program. These analyses were significant, as they revealed aspects of these youths' interactions and their coexistence. On the other hand, one particular experience from during this research process made me realise the potential of another research methodology, namely "becoming a performer".
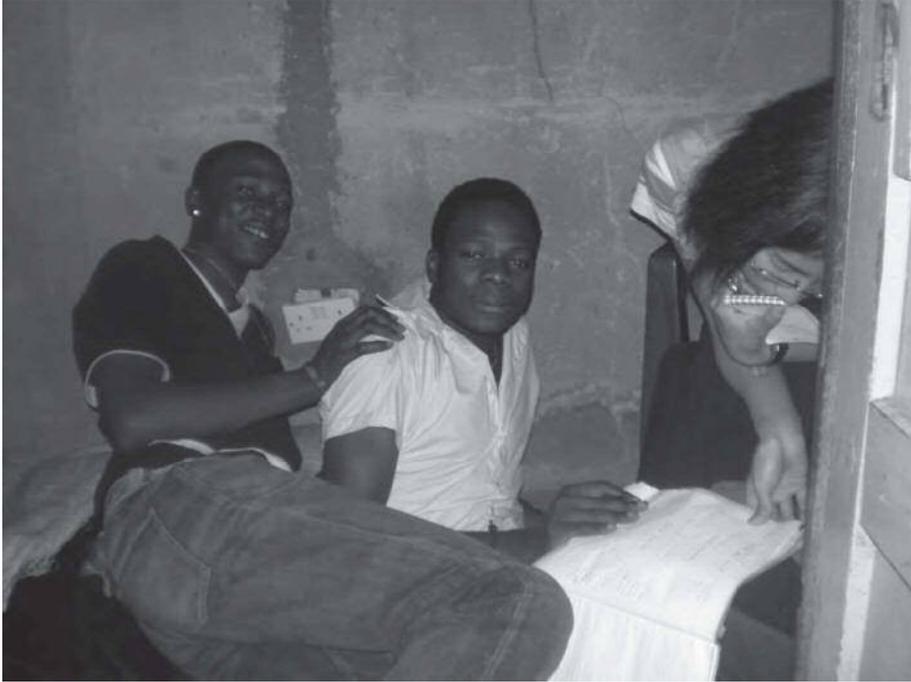
Picture2. They make a programme for karioki and I record it (2007)

The experience was as follows:

<Episode1>

One night, I watched karioki and was ready to take field notes as usual. The show was nearing its end and there were few people in the audience. Then one of performers called out to me and said, 'Play one song'. I was happy to be invited. I had waited for the chance to do 'mime', because I thought it would help me to form a better relationship with the performers. For this reason, I had learned one local song perfectly. When the song I requested began to play, I left my field notes backstage, took a microphone and went on stage. When I turned back, I saw that the performers were watching me on stage. After I performed and returned backstage, the performers thanked me for my performance. When I heard this, I felt very happy and more certain about my purpose to form a good relationship with them. They took an interest in me now, as they had asked me and watched me perform. This made me feel I was really spending time with them, as before that I had just been observing them while I myself had remained an invisible person (experience from 2007).

I had this same experience several times with other groups. It was difficult to form friendships with performers and talk to them personally, and I sometimes

felt uneasy when I spent time with them. However, when they invited me to the stage I would become "one of the performers' to them. I recognised that I would be able to better communicate with the performers by playing a role on stage. Consequently, the following concept came to mind: merely asking questions as a researcher was not enough to collect information, whereas playing the role of a "performer" would work in favour for my research as it would enable me to experience and understand the interactions between myself and the performers. This concept made me seriously consider becoming a performer as a way to conduct research in Kampala.

4. The Experience of Becoming a Performer

This section reports my experience of acting as a karioki performer for 3 months (June–September 2011), and what I subsequently came to reconsider about the performers' style.

Calls from Performers

As explored in paragraph 3, I had come to understand through interviews and observation that karioki groups had fluid membership. I saw performers play karioki with groups other than their own. When I became a performer, too, I had no choice but to do the same.

Before acting as a performer, I would contact performers by telephone to make appointments. In turn, after some performers watched me on stage, they would likewise start calling me and ask me to perform with them. They would say, "Do you have a show today? If you don't have, come and join us", or, "Where are you? We have a show. Come now". Their invitations were sudden, abrupt and sometimes persistent. During the time of my observation research I had noticed that performers received invitations via mobile phone on the day of the show. The same thing happened to me. If you do not have a mobile phone or stay with other performers, it is difficult to receive these abrupt invitations and respond to them.

In Uganda, mobile phone ownership began to increase rapidly around 2000, similar to other developing countries worldwide. In the early 1990s, Celtel opened businesses in Uganda and made mobile phones available to many people, followed by Mobile Telephone Networks (MTN) in 1998 (Mwesige, 2004: 87). In 1996, the number of mobile lines was 3,500, which increased to 210,000 in 2001 (Mwesige, 2004: 87-88). Mobile phones were soon widespread, and karioki became popular after 2000. Added to the fact that the birth of karioki overlapped with the spread of mobile phones in Uganda, the results of my

observation survey and participant research after becoming a performer demonstrate that mobile phones are one of the important tools for playing karioki.

When I received a call for show, I would conduct myself as follows. I considered that I belonged to a certain group, so when that group had a show it took precedence over invitations from other groups. If my group did not have a show, I went to perform with other groups, because I wished to experience as many shows as possible. However, during these shows of other groups, I would meet some performers that I had seen before in yet another group as well as some of performers with whom I had performed the night before; in other words, I would unexpectedly meet members of my own same group. I began to see not only the network between these different groups but also their style of moving around individually to perform karioki.

The importance of mobile phones, as mentioned above, could have been derived from observation even if I had not become a performer myself. Furthermore, through my observation survey, I had found out that performers moved between different groups for playing karioki. However, when I became a performer, I obtained a new perspective, namely that karioki is performed by groups that do not have a strong collective feeling. If I had studied only the selected groups, I would have continued to conduct research with the impression of specific group frames. When I started to act as a performer, accepted their invitations and participated in their shows, I could observe all performers that belonged to the same group as I did, whether they were old friends or complete stranger to me at that time. Through playing karioki with performers with whom I had very different kinds of relationships, I could find out that it was better to consider karioki as played by a gathering of performers, depending on the situation of every individual performer rather than by a specific or fixed group. The essential features of karioki cannot be captured when one considers "a performer from a certain group to make a guest appearance". This could not be revealed through only an observation survey; in my case, by becoming a performer I was able to watch participants in karioki with whom I was in direct contact and, as such, I came to understand the formation of groups more correctly.

Requests from Performers

After I became a performer, I started to be bothered backstage. Performers began to request my personal belongings. When I decided to become a performer, following the pattern of other performers, I bought along a knapsack

with shoes, cloths and accessories, which I would take to every performance venue. It was quite a lot of baggage. One of the performers told me that if you

Picture 3. When I dance on the stage as a karioki performer (2012)

saw someone with such a big bag in the evening, you would know that he/ she is a karioki performer. Although every performer brought his/ her own belongings to performance places, as just described, they actually asked me to give them my belongings backstage. They asked me to lend them my clothes, accessories, makeup kit and sandals, which were good to wear when going to the bathroom. Sometimes, they used my belongings without asking me, even if they had only met me for the first time. Sometimes my belongings were lost and I had to look for them during the show, while at other times they asked for one of my belongings that I had planned to use on stage. At times, their request embarrassed me, when I was busy preparing for performances according to the stage program, or when I was resting backstage. One time I rejected such a request for my belongings. This episode went as follows:

<Episode2>
In the back stage area, after my turn on stage, I felt cold and put my shawl on when I sat down to rest. Kai (all performer names in this article are pseudonyms) came and requested my shawl. He always wore my shawl for his traditional dance

performance. I would give it to Kai most times, but this time I felt tired, wanted to wear it myself and was irritated by his way of playing God with my belonging. I refused his request. At first he accepted my refusal, but after some time he came back and asked me whether I was angry. I told him that I simply wanted to wear my shawl. Then, he suggested me to use Anna's shawl, which she had left nearby, and he gave it to me. He told me that he needed my shawl because he wanted a thick one, and mine was thicker than others (31th July 2011).

This episode shows that it is natural for these performers to share everything for their own convenience. I felt that this attitude was strange, as I expected everyone would have a specific role in creating a show together as performers. I believed that, when you were a performer, you had to play your part without disturbing other performers, which was the attitude I was used to in Japan. However, I could hardly recognise it in karioki. When they perform, karioki players place a greater value on ad-libbing than on what has been predetermined before the show. If they require immediate action on the scene, they use other performers' belongings or goods easily to make a good stage performance.
When I was conducting observation research, requests for my belongings from performers sometimes happened, as well. For instance, one occasion occurred as follows:

> < Episode3 >
> One night, when I watched karioki performers and was ready to take field notes, one male performer came over and told me: 'Give it to me'. He pointed at the belt that I wore. I removed it and gave it to him, and he added it to his costume. Consecutively, he demanded the bag I always carried around during my research. After I handed him my bag, he told me to give him the digital camera I likewise carried all the time. When he wore all my belongings and headed to the stage, he turned around and poked a finger at my glasses, which I always wore. I could not reject and gave them to him, too. This left me with poor vision, and I felt as if I had been robbed of everything I owned. I waited for him to return backstage (28th December 2007).

If you would observe only this aspect of the experience, you might think the performers ridiculed me and that they seemed to be dubious about my observation research that I conducted every time backstage or that they simply implemented an idea that had come to their mind for making their audience have fun on the weekend's show. However, after I became a performer myself, I could come to understand their basic attitude when I saw them use my belongings without hesitation many times, and sometimes their behaviour

disrupted my own intentions or plans for my performance. In the making of karioki performances, creativity with instantaneous force on scene is demanded, but not creativity that is planned at the performer's own pace.

The Karioki group was comprised individuals who never restricted each other and were free to separate or collaborate. Every performer equipped his/her own belongings for their performances, like preparing costumes. However, their performance show was not made up only by every performer's ability, but rather by their community wherein they all shared their belongings.

Abrupt Participation

I performed on stage in 52 karioki shows during a period of 3 months, from 22th July to 11th September 2011. When I began to participate in karioki, my performances were only "solo mime", which meant I was performing alone on stage. As I continued to perform, the variety of my items increased. From all the performances I have done I did "solo mime" for 153 songs; "pair mime" for 37 songs, which has two performers playing together; "solo dance" for 27 songs; "group dance" for 20 songs, which includes multiple performers dancing to the same choreography; and "comedy" for 17 songs. Additional items I performed were traditional dance and "group mime". I was not the one who increased the variety of my items; rather, the different performance situations influenced the increase. Most of the time, opportunities came abruptly, and I would have to do a new performance that I had not prepared for at all. These episodes are described below.

<Episode4>
Two male performers stood by for "comedy" near the stage. Abruptly, Anna told them to take me along on the stage. Mary, who stood near Anna, pointed to one of them and said, "Beat this guy and play a woman who wants money". The male performers did not object to this idea, and I went on stage as they told me to when the "comedy" song began to play (7th July 2011).

<Episode5>
When I went on stage for a "solo dance", a male performer, Victor, who had danced on stage before my turn, returned backstage; however, after he watched me dance, he came back onto the stage and began to dance next to me. We danced on the same choreography, which was standard for the song that was being played, and performed the popular couple act together (26th August 2011).

As these episodes show, the utterances and actions of other performers led to

the increase and variety of my performance items when I was not ready for it. Even when I had prepared well for a performance with other performers, things would occur as described below.

<Episode 6>
Kai, who stayed together with me longer than the other performers, told me that he wanted to play "comedy" with me. He asked me to memorize the words of a certain song, helped me write down all the words and explained to me about the songs he planned to use and the story he had created for our "comedy". On the actual stage, however, when we played our "comedy", the two performers that had been hired by the performance venue as warm-up comedians came back out on stage. I could not play my part well because of their sudden emergence. However, after the show Kai told me: "I did not know they came to the stage, but I know, they always do that. It is good, they coloured our comedy" (6th–10th August 2011).

As the above episodes show, abrupt changes happened regularly, and it was natural for performers to deal with them. This connects creativity with instantaneous force on scene, as described in paragraph 4-2. The players did not intend to prepare for performances beforehand, but they easily implemented ideas, which one might call sudden impulses, when they made a show, and they had no scruples about involving other people's belongings or other performers. This reminded me of the time when I had observed performers backstage and had written down all the performance items that they had played with.

As I explained in paragraph 3-2, during my observation research before I became a performer, I found that performers freely changed the programs that they made prior to a show. I had asked them why they change their programs, but I could not discover their common agenda or policy for karioki. My questions seemed to have bothered the performers, and they usually did not seem eager to reply to my questions. After I began performing on stage myself, I recalled their way of responding to my questions. I was confused by the abrupt changes to the programs. It was a big issue for me to change what I had prepared before the performance, based on my theatre experience from school days in Japan. However, in karioki the plans that performers shared before beginning their show were always changing. I realized that this was the nature of karioki. It is important for performers to deal with these changes, and they always assume that changes will occur. Thus, I would not have found any common policy for karioki, if I had merely asked for the reason why the programs were changed.
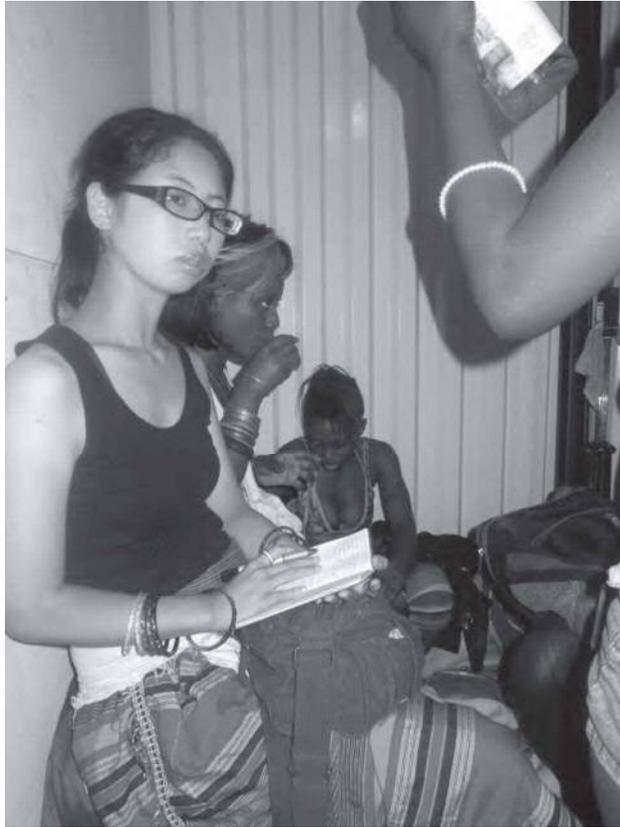
Picture 4. Writing what happened at backstage of karioki, when I performed (2012)

5. Conclusion

This section summarises what has been reported in this article. I chose to become a performer after I tried to conduct interviews and observations, because I wanted to have close interactions with youths living in Kampala, an African urban city. It was also an attempt to enter the scene where African popular culture was enjoyed. When I began to interact with the youth as a performer, it helped me to approach their daily lives and involve other performers in my own life. Through this experience, I could observe the fluidity of individuals constituting karioki groups as well as their combinations backstage (where they ''shared' their belongings) and on stage (where they handled abrupt changes). These new perspectives were valuable for my study.

My findings through the ''becoming a performer'' should be considered as an extension of what I had learned from interviews and observation surveys. I had already noticed the fluidity of the performers' groups and their improvising on stage before I became a performer. However, I must emphasise that the direct

experience of the gap between my habits and theirs, through sharing time and acting together in the process of making karioki, has been very important for my study. This experience enabled me to make the research move forward. From only interviews and backstage observations I might have been able to "write" about their performances and the construction of their shows, however, I would not have been able to "understand" them. When I became a performer and interacted with other performers, in daily life and on the stage, I began to "understand" all the events that I had observed before. In other words, I began to notice their impromptu community, which was the key to playing karioki, and began to see this policy constitutes the essential element of their urban city life. I obtained this perspective by becoming a performer, and by spending time with the other performers backstage and on stage.

This article has demonstrated the potential of the research method explained through my experience, which is to participate in activities with the target people and, as such, to play another role besides that of a researcher. Therefore, I wish to confirm the value of participant research in urban popular culture studies.

In the case of stage performance that I studied, the interactions between people happen in a short time, during which the players aim to complete their performance. At the time, you have to cooperate and share with others. The resulting events and the way the players treat one another demonstrate not only features of the performers' behaviour but also the habits of common sense in their society. Because of this, entering the scene of stage performance is a very significant approach to the study of its social relations.

As was explored in paragraph 1, previous studies examined social relations through urban popular culture. They analysed what types of popular culture are expressed and indicated mainly; however, they do not explore how people enjoy popular culture together. I propose, therefore, that participant research enables researchers to enjoy popular culture along with the target people, and that it, as such, can contribute greatly to popular culture studies. While it is very important to consider the meaning of what is consumed among people, it is also logical to examine the behaviour of people consuming in urban Africa, which happens with fluidity and is most likely affected by globalization. For this reason, it is indeed important for researchers to participate in consuming with the target people. It is difficult for researchers to observe features of consumption, because each person enjoys popular culture individually, and their social and cultural backgrounds differ from those of the target society. Joining people within their society, on the other hand, by creating something together and interacting with

them, would present a valuable method of research. Therefore, I believe, the research method demonstrated in this study, namely that of 'becoming a performer', which means participating, creating together and describing what occurs, constitutes a significant methodology. Through this, we can not only consider symbolical meanings but also watch the scene when they consume and observe people's attitude towards their consumption as part of the target society, when studying social relations through popular culture research. As I have shown in this article, participating in popular culture, in addition to conducting observation research and interviews, can lead to progressive results, when the objective is examining how people interact and stay together.

Since I began my research, I have participated in other performances besides karioki, in which I participated as described in episode1. I joined a drama performance at a large theatre with nearly 800 seats, a comedian show at a performance hall, a movie production sold on DVD, a drama broadcasted on TV and promotional videos to advertise music. However, my experiences of participating in these other performances are not numerous, and I cannot sufficiently analyse them here. I am certain, however, that I was able to determine a common ground with what I had observed in karioki, namely, the demand for impromptu community cooperation without prior arrangements or rehearsals. According to each performance's history, people's backgrounds and performance venues in question, different features will be observed. To come to a clearer conclusion, their urban social relationships will have to be studied more closely.

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