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Decolonizing Audio Education: A study of engagement events with West African audio engineer, Tupaï N'Gouin

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents an AES education event and a closely aligned studio residency at the University of Victoria, featuring N'Gouin-Claih Patrick Arnoud Koffi, also known as Tupaï, a beatmaker and music producer from Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. A case study methodology is used to examine the challenges and benefits such initiatives present for

Western institutions and their educational and pedagogical missions. The research data is analyzed through the themes of symbolic representation, unconscious bias, cultural competency, and structural inequalities to assess Tupaï's experience and provide recommendations for similar future events. The findings emphasize a need to improve materials used to support EDI-specific activities, the development of project charters for engagement events with minority group members, the need for ongoing relationship building between minority groups and institutions, and enhanced institutional support.

1 Introduction

The AES Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) committee webpage (https://www.aes.org/community/diversity) is the primary resource for society members working in the field of EDI (the preferred acronym used by the funding agency that has supported this research and employed for the remainder of this paper). It includes information about the D&I committee, resources, and an overview of past achievements. Active since 2016, the committee identifies projects and coordinates partnerships that respond to the gendered aspects [1][2] and harmful elements of audio culture [3][4][5], while helping to showcase African American members on panels, workshops, and keynote presentations at society conferences and conventions. In 2023, a pilot study of convention participants and subsequent analysis yielded the first EDI dataset for the AES community [6]. Although the sample size was small,

the Wu et al. study reaffirms that the membership of the AES is predominantly composed of individuals who identify as white males, as previously reported by Young et al.
[7].

The nature of this type of empirical study means that minority groups voices remain at risk of being overwhelmed by the majority – there are simply fewer responses – and therefore our understanding of their experience is compromised. Evidence of this is the fact that the AES now hosts yearly Latin American conferences (Quito, Ecuador 2023; La Paz, Bolivia 2024; Mexico City, Mexico 2025), but this membership group is largely missing from the studies data. This supports Wu et al.'s conclusion that the AES leadership should work to improve processes which would provide greater specificity about this international society's demographics.

Therefore, while the EDI dataset and study remain an important initiative, hearing predominantly from the majority poses challenges when assessing the efficacy of EDI efforts and initiatives for the society's membership. The theme of decolonization—the process of dismantling colonial systems, power structures, and ideologies to restore sovereignty, cultural identity, and self-determination to Indigenous peoples—was absent from Wu et al.'s study but is closely linked to EDI work, particularly in its goals of increasing diversity and inclusion through representation.

The events outlined in this paper focus on diversity, inclusion, and decolonizing activity, as well as the challenges and benefits such initiatives present for Western institutions and their educational and pedagogical missions. Building upon research that documents West African audio engineers, producer and musicians approaches and experiences [8][9][10] this paper focusses on the experiences of Patrick Arnoud Koffi, also known as Tupaï N'Gouin, a beatmaker and music producer from Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire who participated at the AES 154th Convention and closely aligned one-week artist residency at the University of Victoria. By centering the analysis on Tupaï's experience, the study's primary goal is to explore how these initiatives affect the minority group participant. What was the value, benefit, and challenges these initiatives had for Tupaï, and what can we learn from these experiences as we continue to work towards a more equitable, diverse and inclusive audio community.

1.1 Background

The AES community was first introduced to Tupaï by Pras et al. [9] who profiled him as part of their ethnographic study of West African re-mixers and beat makers. That study and the engagement events examined in this paper are both part of a larger research project titled,



Fig. 1: Tupaï and student working in studio, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

the West African Audio Network (WAAN), with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Tupaï was, in fact, scheduled to attend the AES 153rd Convention, where the paper above was presented, but he was unable to renew his passport in time to travel for the event. It is important to note that consular delays, obtaining or renewing passports, and securing visas for our West African collaborators has been an on-going issue as part of this larger grant project. Tupaï holds a French passport and, as such, doesn't require a visa for entry into either Canada or the United States.

2 Methods

This study employs a qualitative case study design following Yin's [11] methodological framework. Two cases are used, allowing for analysis across multiple settings and participant groups. Following the chronological order of activity, the first case is a week-long studio residency at the University of Victoria, and the second case is a presentation given on the education stage as part of the AES 154th Convention, held in New York in 2023.

The research data includes multiple sources of evidence, including a semi-structured interview between Tupaï and McNally, course materials, course experience surveys, the education stage proposal document, and email and WhatsApp correspondence related to both cases.
Direct observation methods were also used by McNally to provide contextual insights that complement the other data sources.

Following Patton's [12] three-step model, the data was first collected, arranged, and research questions were formulated. In the second step, the data was grouped and organized to identify themes for deductive analysis. Drawing upon literature from the field of EDI, the themes used for this study are symbolic representation [13], unconscious bias [14], cultural competency [15], and structural inequalities [16]. The final step involved synthesizing and interpreting the analysis and reporting the findings.

2.1 Case One: University of Victoria Studio Residency

From October 16–20, 2023, Tupaï visited the School of Music at the University of Victoria. The goal of this activity was to provide an opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students at UVic to connect with Tupaï, learn about his studio and professional work in Abidjan, explore his approach to beat-making, and more generally, engage in a cultural exchange through studio activities. Daily sessions were scheduled for Tupaï, and students were notified of the schedule and encouraged to attend. As part of the residency, Tupaï also presented his approach to beat-making in a 400-level sound recording class and a student course union meeting. Additionally, he profiled his professional work and career in a 300-level Art History and Visual Studies (AHVS) course titled Art and Decolonization. Photographs of the events were used to confirm that at least 35 students had the opportunity to hear from and learn from Tupaï. During the in-studio sessions, students performed and contributed elements to musical productions in collaboration with Tupaï, who used his personal laptop, software, and audio interface to develop song or track ideas.

2.2 Case Two: AES 154th Education stage presentation

Following the UVic studio residency, Tupaï traveled to New York, where he attended the AES 154th Convention and presented as part of the education stage programming. McNally pitched the presentation to conference organizers, arguing that it was important to hear directly from engineers in the global South about



Fig. 2: Tupaï and James Clemens-Seeley at AES 154th Convention, New York

their experiences working in the field of audio, including what, if any, education and training opportunities are available to them. It was further argued that this "[would] serve to contextualize our own students' experiences and allow them to reflect on what they, as the next generation of audio professionals, can do to help build a more inclusive

and diverse community of audio engineers." The hour-long presentation was conducted as an interview between Tupaï and McNally, moderated by Gabe Herman. James Clemens-Seeley, who is a collaborator on the WAAN project, generously volunteered to provide French-English translation services.

Because the education stage was located on the main exhibition floor, it was difficult to discern the number of attendees who engaged with the presentation, but it is estimated to be no greater than fifteen to twenty people. The format allowed Tupaï to introduce himself and his work, including his experience working professionally in Abidjan and internationally. The music scene in Abidjan was then explored, including Tupaï's experience and understanding of how international record labels interface with local musicians, studios, and audiences. Specific studios and institutions referenced in previous publications [9] were then explored in depth, including what (if any) training programs or opportunities exist through these institutions. A public questionand-answer period followed this interview and included an opportunity for Tupaï to audition several of his music productions.

3 Results

3.1 Symbolic Representation

"Diversity can be treated as an aesthetic or performative gesture, a way of rebranding an institution rather than transforming its structures." [13]

On the surface, the data produced little evidence that the activities were perceived as examples of symbolic representation. The UVic students actively engaged with Tupaï and expressed appreciation for his contributions. This was communicated through in-class feedback and course experience surveys, where one student indicated,
"diversity & inclusion [was taken] seriously, not token." Correspondence shows that decision-making power was given to Tupaï for UVic studio activities, and the opportunity to include his voice in the AHVS course points to curricular changes on campus that align with institutional EDI initiatives and goals. The interview with Tupaï indicated that he felt the students valued their time with him and described the activity as an "exchange" and an opportunity to "teach," and supports it being a legitimate engagement event. As a grantfunded initiative, the studio residency is, however, not a sustainable model, and without institutional support, it would require re-envisioning.

The AES event provided less data for analysis regarding the theme of symbolic representation. However, the presentation was one of two EDI-themed discussions, which is significant and positive, given that there were six education stage presentations in total. Information regarding the planning, scheduling, and recruitment of participants for the education stage at the AES convention falls outside the scope of this study and would require further research to determine if the activity reported here was part of broader structural changes with regard to EDI initiatives.

3.2 Unconscious Bias

"The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases are involuntary, automatic, and often operate outside of our awareness." [14]

Direct observation was the principle means of identifying evidence of implicit or unconscious bias by the studies participants. Two instances were observed, noted and subsequently interrogated in the post-event interview with Tupaï.
The first occurred as part of the UVic studio sessions, where a student was observed to "take over" a technical task from Tupaï. The act adhered to the description above and was "involuntary" and "automatic", and despite best intentions, a sense of technical superiority was communicated. Reflecting upon this observation, Tupaï indicated that there is not "*a way* [emphasis added]" when it comes to music production and that the creative product will be different, "depending on how the basic skills are learned." Echoing the goals of decolonizing activities, he goes on to state, "[The]
Western world has a style, but it is not the main canvas."

The second instance of unconscious bias was observed when an audience member responded to the auditioning of Tupaï's music productions during the question-andanswer period of the education stage event. Having introduced and presented excerpts of several of his music productions, the audience member asked Tupaï to confirm his involvement, asking, "You made that?" This, despite the fact that the event was centered on
Tupaï and that he had clearly been identified as a music producer working at the highest professional level in his home country of Côte d'Ivoire. It begs the rhetorical question: why wouldn't the music production be good? In the interview with Tupaï, this comment was addressed and was memorable to him. However, he prioritized the networking opportunities the AES event provided, indicating that, in his experience, this type of interaction was a "common" response when the audience isn't familiar with the artist or producer.

Tupaï's responses to interview questions also revealed unconscious bias on his part. In response to a question about the benefit of the activities to him professionally and personally, Tupaï stated that the AES event afforded him the opportunity to get to know the "men behind the music." This serves as a reminder that, as Brereton et al. [17] note, music technology as a field seems resistant to speedy change—and this is not limited to geographical regions—and we need to continue to look for opportunities for change.

3.3 Cultural Competency

"Cultural competency is the ability of individuals and systems to effectively and respectfully engage with people from diverse backgrounds through awareness, knowledge, and skill-building." [15]

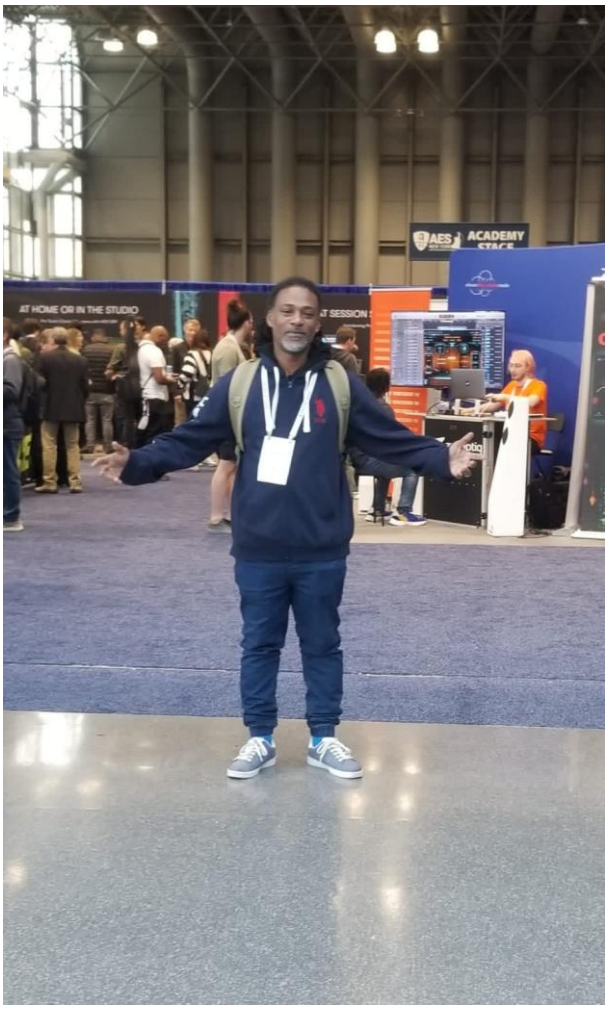


Fig. 3: Tupaï at AES 154th Convention, New York

For both the UVic and AES events, Pras et al.'s publication [9], which featured Tupaï, was used to introduce him to his audience and to initiate a relationship between him and students, as well as the conference organizers and attendees. For the AES education event, the paper was cited in both the proposal document and the publicized event description; however, it is not possible to ascertain the level of engagement attendees had with this resource.

An analysis of course materials shows that students were provided with links to the paper, as well as to Tupaï's music productions and videos, prior to his in-class presentation. However, an analysis of student

engagement with these resources using the course management system revealed that only a minority of students downloaded the paper or viewed his videos. Observations of in-class sessions, including questions asked by students about Tupaï's background and work, further reinforced that engagement with the provided reference material was low.

A foundational aspect of both events was language. Tupaï's first language is French, and while Canada is a bilingual country, the language of instruction at UVic is English. Analysis of email correspondence confirms that this was discussed in advance with Tupaï, and it was agreed that English would be used for the UVic events. One student, who is bilingual, was able to provide informal translations for some in-class activities, but they were not present at all events and, as a student, had their own learning priorities and classwork to balance.

The AES proposal document doesn't include reference to language or the need for a translator. As noted in the description of the AES case, James Clemens-Seely agreed to volunteer as translator. McNally, who was present for both the UVic and AES events observed that when using a translator, it was easier for Tupaï to to fully articulate himself, a fact he confirmed in the post-event interview. Tupaï indicated that he wanted to "challenge himself" to communicate in English for his professional development, and acknowledging and supporting this fact was a notable 'blind-spot' on behalf of the organizers of both events.

3.4 Structural Inequalities

"Structural inequalities refer to deeply embedded institutional and systemic barriers that create unequal access to resources, rights, and opportunities for different social groups, regardless of individual intent."
[16]

As stated in the background section, Tupaï holds a French passport, and this was a consideration when determining who from the West African network of audio professionals could participate in the two events. To provide further context, WAAN collaborator Eliezer Oubda was unable to obtain a U.S. visitor visa and, as a result, could not attend the previous year's AES convention in New York. Ivorian nationals require visitor visas for both Canada and the United States, which is not a requirement for French nationals. So, while the extra bureaucracy, including attending an in-person visa application meeting and visa fees, was not required for Tupaï, it is a reality of working with West African collaborators. This fact is amplified when we consider that, as independent engineers, producers, artists, and business owners, our West African collaborators are also not earning income while attending these events. While an honorarium was provided, and Tupaï's travel and accommodation were paid for using grant funding, it was not anticipated that this standard treatment of visiting collaborators could actually be a cause for concern.

Analysis of the email and WhatsApp messages provides details regarding this aspect of the events. Institutional support and verification of immigration and entry processes and procedures are identified and communicated, but the messages illustrate that Tupaï continued to express concern and "worried" that his visits could negatively affect future immigration or work opportunities. The messages also show that Tupaï worked to find information regarding entry and immigration questions from within his own personal network, and that confirmation from this network helped alleviate his concerns about this aspect of the events. In the end, entry into Canada and the United States was uneventful, but it is evidence of a hierarchy based upon colonial legacies that should be acknowledged as something collaborators from the global South are likely to experience.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

The events at the University of Victoria and the AES in New York City are described by Tupaï as a "great opportunity" full of "rich encounters, music, and music [production] techniques." He also indicates that it was an opportunity to share his points of view on pedagogy and teaching techniques and, "explain how things work in the music industry in Africa, particularly in West Africa, Côte d' Ivoire, Abidjan."

These statements, which focus on Tupaï's work, his perspectives, and his appreciation for the space given

to students to learn about the West African music industry, indicate that the activities were effective in their goals of advancing inclusion and decolonization. It was also clear that there was an opportunity to improve upon the planning, coordination, and execution of such events. Drawing upon the two cases and the thematic analysis, the following recommendations are intended to support similar engagement activities in the future and identify where there is a need for increased resources, support, or different approaches.

1. Generate pre- and post-event materials, e.g., presenter biographies, musical excerpts or playlists, regional or geographical information, post-event reflections, etc., to provide context for the specific activity and its legacy, ensuring that it is considered as part of a larger structural change to course or convention activities, rather than a 'one-off' or 'symbolic' gesture.

2. Use project charters to engage all participants in a dialogue about the necessity for mutual respect and a shared understanding of the activity goals, and to stimulate awareness of unconscious biases.

3. Work to build relationships in advance of events to improve cultural competency among participants, and determine what supports are necessary and desired for specific activities, e.g., translation services.

4. Improve institutional supports to include or identify peer voices from the community to help minority group participants navigate questions regarding their visit, e.g., visa, immigration, or permit questions.

5 Acknowledgments

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