

# Becoming a musical bridge from Africa to Japan



The djembe, a type of African drum  
Photo: Latyr Sy

Latyr Sy was born on the Senegalese island of Gorée,<sup>1</sup> a world heritage site. Since coming to Japan in 1995, he has performed as a percussionist and singer with many Japanese artists and at many international events.

## Murakami Kayo

He began playing djembe,<sup>2</sup> an African drum, at a young age, and has been active as a percussionist ever since. He says that when he first visited Japan in 1994, at the age of 21, he became interested in the country and felt a desire to popularize African drumming in Japan. He came back to Japan the next year and made it his base for kicking off his career.

“When I first got to Japan, I had opportunities to enjoy *noh*, the Japanese classical theater, and to interact with *ohtsuzumi* player Okura Shonosuke, the Important Intangible Cultural Property General Designation Holder, Noh Musician. The *ohtsuzumi* is a traditional Japanese hand drum and looks very similar to the talking drum, a type of African drum. They have many things in common, such as the use of animal skin for drumheads. I was greatly inspired by the playing method and timbre.”

Before long, Latyr was invited to perform internationally in collaboration with performers of Japanese classical theater such as *noh* and *kyogen*. The shows were well-received, and Latyr went on to play at international events in Japan and overseas, such as the Torch Welcome Ceremony for the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympic Games and the 2004 Athens Summer Olympic Games.

One especially impressive performance for him was with Nomura Manjojo, a Japanese *kyogen* performer, in 2002 for the opening ceremony of the Silk Road Festival in Washington, D.C., attended by then-U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and other dignitaries. Latyr said he had to brace himself for such a big event attended by such distinguished guests. “It was an honor to be able to perform on a strict Japanese classical theater stage and to represent Africa, while playing with world-famous artists. Actu-

ally, according to its original tradition, such an ensemble would have been inconceivable. I was also very surprised by this new form of Japanese traditional performing arts.”

Latyr has also been active in a wide range of other work, including performing with many big-name Japanese artists, working in music production for commercials, and holding African percussion workshops around Japan.

“I want to be a bridge that connects Japan and Africa through music,” he says. By this, he means that he hopes not only to pursue new musical possibilities through sessions that go beyond national and genre borders, but also “that more people to feel the attraction of Africa.”

“I think that for a lot of people, when they hear the term ‘African music,’ they picture something intense and rhythmical. But there is also African music that is calm and healing.



Photo: Yoshi Josef Toomuch 1



Photo: Latyr Sy 2



Photo: Latyr Sy 3



Photo: Latyr Sy 4

1.Latyr Sy 2.Latyr plays an African drum 3.A photo of Latyr on a *noh* stage with a djembe, a traditional African drum 4.A photo of Latyr in a dedication performance at Hakone Shrine with Okura Shonosuke (Important Intangible Cultural Property General Designation Holder, Noh Musician)

Africa is a vast continent with diverse rhythms and cultures, depending on the region, and this goes beyond the realm of music. I want many people to find out what today's Africa really looks like, including its more than 50 nations, and the culture, history, and economy of each region. If my activities could lead to such a realization, I would be very happy."

Latyr says that when he first came to Japan, he hardly understood Japanese, and had many difficulties. However, as the phrase "music has no language" implies, once he started to play

music, he saw it transcends national and other differences and brings us together. He strongly felt that this is the appeal of music, and as a Senegalese, as well as an artist who expresses Japanese musical culture, he has expanded the range of his activities.

From now on, Latyr is sure to continue bringing excitement to many people by going beyond the category of African music to create new music that combines a wide range of genres, including Japanese classical music, Western classical music, Latin, jazz, and rock.



Photo: Yoshi Josef Toomuch

1. Gorée, which was registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978, is a small island off the coast of the Senegalese capital of Dakar. It was a site involved in the slave trade, and a detention facility built in 1776 still remains.
2. The djembe is a percussion instrument that has traditionally been used in West Africa. It is made by hollowing out a log in the shape of a goblet, covering the wide end with the skin of a goat, sheep or other animal, and leaving the narrow end open. It is played with the bare hands, and several different sounds can be produced, depending on the position and shape of the hands. Also called "jembe" or "djimbe."