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Collaborative Ethnographic Research on Music Notation: Methodological Insights from a Pandeiro Project

In the project *Principles of music notation in a cross-cultural perspective using the example of the Brazilian instrument pandeiro*, we, João Araújo and Johannes Nilles, collaborated on research on strategies of pandeiro notation. Following an extensive review of existing notation systems, a selection of these systems was compared in order to identify strategies employed to represent specificities of pandeiro playing techniques. At the heart of the project is the pandeiro, a Brazilian frame drum with jingles (Anunciação 1990: 13–14; Pinto 1991: 138–39; Rodrigues 2014; Vidili 2017: 54–58; 2021: 43–44; Schettini 2024: 94–109) and its specific playing technique. The central research question was: How do existing pandeiro notation systems adapt 5-line staff notation to represent specificities of the pandeiro practice?

Another central component of the research project was the methodological reflection on research collaboration. To this end, all team meetings were minuted and Nilles kept research diaries. Based on this approach, our research contributes to the discourse on collaborative research in ethnomusicology. This begins with an examination of common understandings of collaborative ethnographic research, which are then related to the project that was carried out. Selected aspects are used to discuss the challenges and potential of a collaborative, reciprocal research design. This paper therefore focuses on providing methodological insights into collaborative knowledge production. The analysis results of the project can be read in more detail elsewhere (Araújo and Nilles 2025: Pandeiro Research). We recommend reviewing our research poster (https://poetajoao.com/pandeiro-research) before reading this article, as it provides a more comprehensive foundation for understanding.

Collaborative or Reciprocal

Although the idea of collaboration has become very popular in ethnology and ethnomusicology in recent years, there is still no consensus in academic discourse on what collaborative ethnographic research means and how it should be carried out. Lassiter aptly notes that ethnography is collaborative by definition (2005: 16). After all, the term is derived from the Latin collaborare ("to work together"). In empirical research such as ethnography, collaboration between people is at the core. Even an interview can be seen as a co-constructive collaboration between two people (Campbell et al. 2018: 96). For this reason, ethnologist Elaine Lawless advocates using the term collaborators (or participants) instead of informants or subjects (2000: 197). In doing so, she points to the collaborative nature of even established

ethnographic research designs. Beyond these terminological discussions, however, the term collaborative research also refers to a specific mode of co-construction of knowledge, as will be shown below.

Due to the ambiguity of the term "collaboration", even in explicitly collaborative research designs, a brief consideration of common understandings follows. According to an initial understanding outlined here, collaboration refers to the cooperation of multiple researchers. This refers exclusively to professional, academic researchers (Lassiter 2005: 17), who, according to this understanding, are distinct from the persons being researched, such as interview partners. This type of collaboration is transferable to other (non-empirical) academic disciplines. The collaboration between two mathematicians can also lead to new insights. Nevertheless, researchers use the label "collaborative ethnography" for the first type of research mentioned (Gellner and Quigley 1995; Johansen and White 2002; Wojcik et al. 2020: 202). Collaborations between academic researchers are often interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in nature (Stepputat and Morgenstern 2024: 1).

In his 2005 *Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*, anthropologist Luke Eric Lassiter advocated for an alternative use of the term. According to him, the collaborative aspect of ethnographic research can be found in the particularly close cooperation between an ethnographer and a community member. Such research brings together an emic and an etic perspective, an insider and an outsider perspective (cf. Herndorn 1993) in a research team. Since ethnography is, by definition, collaborative, as described above, Lassiter specifies his idea as follows: "collaborative ethnography moves collaboration from its taken-for-granted background and positions it on center stage" (2005: 16). This second understanding of collaboration attempts to overcome lines of difference (Campbell et al. 2018: 97), which it simultaneously perpetuates by naming them. Lassiter seeks to establish a closer relationship between researchers and research subjects. He thus positions "us", the ethnographers and academics, in opposition to our "interlocutors" (Lassiter 2005: 18), the "local community consultants" (ibid.: 17). A similar understanding of collaborative ethnographic research is shared by Elizabeth Campbell et al. (2018).

At the 2025 annual conference of the largest German-speaking society for musicology, the *Gesellschaft für Musikforschung*, the ethnomusicology section met for a roundtable discussion on processes and qualities of collaboration. At this roundtable, researchers reported on their work with "communities" and indigenous peoples. They paid particular attention to how each of the projects discussed benefited both them and the researchers, for example by creating visibility for indigenous musicians. Discussant Thiago da Costa Oliveira identified a team meeting to define and agree on

the research goals as a necessary first step in a project. According to the understanding shared at the roundtable, collaboration takes place between researchers and a (mostly indigenous) community. The emic-etic binary continues to exist. Unlike Lassiter, however, the researchers here do not attempt to merge into a team, but rather recognize individual perspectives and needs. The idea of give and take, and thus the recognition of different needs and goals of the people involved in the project, is summarized by the term reciprocation (Hinson 1994 in Lassiter 2005: 17).

Reciprocal ethnography (Lawless 1992; 2000; Gay y Blasco and Hernandez 2019) represents one more approach to collaborative research. Anthropologist Paloma Gay y Blasco characterizes her reciprocal research as follows: "This is a dialogue between two specific individuals, two friends, and not a collaboration between a community or group and an anthropologist" (2019: 21), and further: "The fact is that Liria [Hernández] and I understand our collaboration through contrasting perspectives" (ibid.: 139). Reciprocal research therefore does not insist on unifying perspectives or arriving at a common interpretation. It acknowledges differences and utilises them productively. Where collaborative ethnography, according to Glenn Hinson, strives for constant mutual engagement in every phase of the research process (1994 in Lassiter 2005: 17), reciprocal approaches focus more on making contrasting perspectives visible. This is evident in Gay y Blasco's and Liria Hernández's use of two different fonts in their manuscript (2019: 169).[1] In our research, too, we deliberately point out differences and divergent interpretations between the researchers, especially in the conclusions.

The presented understandings of collaborative or reciprocal research are not mutually exclusive. For example, both researchers in a collaboration may have an academic background, but their perspectives may still contrast, especially in transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research designs. Even two researchers with academic backgrounds may have different degrees of proximity to the research subject. Each research constellation is highly individual, and no research design can be transferred in its entirety from one project to another. However, methodological reflection on collaborative research projects in a wide variety of research constellations can provide points of reference and inspiration for further research. For this reason, reflection on the roles of researchers is particularly important. It forms the basis for the concrete design of collaboration in our reciprocal research project. Accordingly, the professional, musical, and academic backgrounds of the two co-researchers are briefly outlined below.

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[1] This technique dates back to a publication by Ian Sanjep Majnep and Ralph Bulmer (1977).

João Araújo is a Brazilian composer, poet, professional *pandeirista*[2], percussionist, and music producer. He comes from Recife, a city where European, African, and indigenous influences combine to form a cultural melting pot that also shapes Araújo's artistic work. This complexity is reflected in his works, which combine music, literature, and scientific writing. With an interdisciplinary academic background – a master's degree in physics and contemporary literature – he has published essays on Brazilian culture, scientific articles, short stories, poems, and texts on the art of playing the pandeiro. Araújo also offers pandeiro workshops and shares his expertise through online courses.

Johannes Nilles is a doctoral candidate in ethnomusicology at the University of Music and Theatre Munich. His research examines the teaching and learning of the Brazilian frame drum pandeiro in workshop contexts. His work combines academic research with musical practice and is based on field research in Salvador da Bahia, Lisbon, and Munich. As a researcher and drummer, he is interested in how musical knowledge is taught, learned, and valued in translocal context. In addition to his research, he teaches percussion (among other instruments, the pandeiro), music education, and ensemble practice at the University of Cologne and is an associate researcher at the Institute for European Ethnomusicology in Cologne.

The short biographies reveal the uniqueness of the researchers' positions. It is not possible to speak of an academic with an etic perspective and a musician with an emic perspective, because although Nilles is closer to musicology and Araújo has been playing the pandeiro much longer than Nilles, both researchers are also at home in the other's domain. The roles of both researchers are hybrid in nature. In this case, it is also a literary scholar collaborating with an ethnomusicologist. Some of the challenges and solutions that the research design has led to in the case of our pandeiro notation research is to be presented in the following.

Collaborative Reflection on Positionality

The meaning of collaborative research in this project had to be negotiated between the researchers, especially at the beginning of the project. To this end, Nilles presented Lassiter's understanding in particular at a team meeting.[3] According to this understanding, as described above, this is a project in which an emic perspective and an etic, academic perspective come together with equal responsibility. The appropriateness of this view was controversially discussed. As part of our collaboration, Nilles repeatedly

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[2] "Pandeirista" is the Portuguese term for a person who plays the pandeiro.
[3] During the most active phase of the collaboration, we held weekly 90-minute team meetings, which were minuted. We also shared materials with each other via a cloud storage service.

introduced Araújo to musicological and anthropological academic discourse, which later allowed us to evaluate whether these frameworks were appropriate for our project.

First, Nilles distinguished between insider-outsider and emic-etic, which Araújo decisively rejected. He argued that Nilles was by no means a true outsider with regard to the pandeiro and that such a clear distinction was untenable. Nilles then introduced the theory of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991), which assumes gradual membership in a musical practice. On that basis, Nilles argued that from his perspective as a white, German-speaking researcher, there are of course limits to becoming an insider in certain musical practices. Nevertheless, the theory of legitimate peripheral participation proved to be more consensual and is also highly compatible with Gay y Blasco's and Hernández's conceptualization of reciprocal ethnography.

Although Lave and Wenger's theory did not originate in ethnology, it proved to be remarkably helpful in reflecting on our own positionality, communicating our own self-perception, and thereby reassuring each other about our roles in the research project.

Selection of Notation Systems

While reviewing literature and the internet for percussion textbooks and pandeiro notation systems, we came across significantly more material than we could have discussed in depth. After an initial review, we therefore had to settle on four systems, which we wanted to analyze in more detail in the first stage of the project and present on conferences.

The discussion took up a lot of space, with various implicit strategies influencing our arguments. One criterion for selection was our own subjective evaluation of the notation system. Although all systems certainly have advantages and disadvantages, there were some that we preferred in our respective educational work, which felt more intuitive to us than others. Thus, the respective artistic and educational backgrounds of both researchers came into play.

Another criterion was the diversity of the selected systems. Contrasting cases highlight individual notation strategies. The greater the diversity of the systems, the greater the potential for analytical insight. This was where the first conflicts between the argumentation strategies arose, because a focus on diversity also meant analyzing notation systems that did not correspond to one's own preferences. Professional interests came into conflict here: do we deal with analytically promising data or do we link up with our professional interests as pandeiro teachers?

The popularity of the system within pandeiro practice and in academic circles was also cited as an argument for its selection. The study of the widely used notation systems of Carlos Stasi and Luiz D'Anunciação (Gianesella 2012: 195–96) ties in more closely with the existing discourse and thus also has the potential to increase the visibility of our research.

Another argument was the apparent reflectiveness of the notation system. In order to assess this, we contacted textbook author Antonio Adolfo (2000) personally. Elsewhere, we discussed it on the basis of the musical notation itself. In Edgar Rocca's textbook, for example, the notation system itself contains little information and therefore relies on extensive textual explanations (1986: 29). Such a system seemed to us to be less productive for analysis than one that deviates from staff notation in several respects (e.g. Anunciação 1990; Sampaio and Bub 2004; Araújo 2025; Suzano, n.d.).

These are just some of the lines of argumentation from our team meetings. Each of them was pursued by us to varying degrees based on our individual positions as co-researchers. Ultimately, we agreed on a compromise between the arguments that served our research interests on the one hand, while keeping educational practice in mind on the other, and finally also the interests of an academic music education and musicology audience. This last requirement led us away from a normative understanding, i.e., the evaluation of the "quality" of the system.

Added to this was the fact that Araújo, as a textbook author, had developed a notation system himself. We weighed up at length whether to include this in the data corpus. On the one hand, we saw great potential for insight in this, as we had very different perspectives and prior knowledge of this system. On the other hand, we discussed our bias and the extent to which we would be able to analyze this notation system with a certain degree of objectivity. After all, Araújo developed it himself and has an interest in its dissemination, as he uses it in his books and workshops. Nilles, as a colleague and a friend, is also far from being a neutral analyst. We ultimately decided to include the system in the data corpus, particularly because of the analytical potential described above. However, the presentation of the results was written by Nilles alone, reflected on jointly, and presented at conferences by Nilles.

Navigating Constant Dualities

At various points during our joint research, it became apparent that the needs and priorities of the two researchers involved were not always entirely compatible. However, we saw this as productive tension. Our project presentations also reflected this tension in their structures: while Araújo would have preferred more space for presenting the analysis results, Nilles considered methodological reflection in the planning phase to be particularly important. In the end, we had to negotiate how to use the limited time

available, since it could only be allocated to one of us for presenting the results, the methodology, or reflections on the research process. Every publication resulting from our reciprocal research acknowledges this difference and deliberately weights these different aspects. The project page https://poetajoao.com/pandeiro-research/ on Araújo's website also serves as a permanent documentation page for the analysis results. This article, which is primarily methodological in nature, is based more on Nilles' suggestions.

For our initial project presentations, we used a research poster as a form of disseminating our findings. Beyond its role as a means of public communication, the process of creating the poster itself became a valuable site of collaboration. While in the early phases of our work we primarily engaged with fragmented texts that fostered a dialogical mode of writing, the creation of the poster led to a more immediate content-related confrontation. The format of a jointly created research poster – limited in scope by design – encouraged direct confrontation with differing perspectives between the researchers. The poster itself was developed in a shared cloud document, which enabled continuous editing by both collaborators.

A reciprocal research project implies a constant duality – in research interests, biographical and professional backgrounds, fundamental social-theoretical assumptions, and conclusions. At the same time, it opens up unique research potential with regard to the common research object, the pandeiro. Collaborative ethnographic research thus provides an opportunity to "learn together about the world" (Campbell et al. 2018: 92).

Collaborative *Ethnographic* Research

So far, this paper has discussed collaborative *ethnographic* research, but mostly the first attribute "collaborative" has been reflected upon. Now that we have provided an insight into the methodology of the project, we would like to conclude by asking how collaboration constitutes ethnographic research. Participatory observation in a field of research is considered a central method of ethnography (Harrison 2020: 344–47). However, it was not applied directly into our research design, but mostly teaching materials were examined. However, some of these originated from contexts that can certainly be defined as fieldwork.[4] Nilles became acquainted with some of the notation systems analyzed in pandeiro workshops during his research in Salvador. One of the textbooks examined (Jacob 2003) also originates from a local music store. Depending on the definition of the field, teaching materials can be understood as artifacts (Thomas 2019: 90–91) and thus as data from the field. Transcriptions and textbooks are therefore also data from participant observation.

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[4] Michelle Kisliuk points out that fieldwork is always defined as such and that there is no clear boundary separating it from "real life" (Kisliuk 2008: 184).

Additionally, the idea of collaborative ethnographic research has its roots in a specific academic tradition. It is not without reason that it has met with considerable approval in ethnomusicology and ethnology, because, as outlined above, it attempts to critically reflect on and realign the relationship between researching outsiders and researched insiders (Weiss 2016). Lassiter therefore describes collaborative ethnography primarily as „an ethical and moral enterprise" (2005: 79). It „tends to challenge traditional scholarly authority" (Campbell et al. 2018: 97), pursues the goal of an "ethical and moral co-commitment" (Lassiter 2005: 98) and thus more symmetrical power relations. Consequently, the classification of *collaborative research* as *ethnographic* is also related to the ethnological discourse within which the concept of collaboration is historically rooted.

Conclusion

This article has presented a broad spectrum of the different qualities of collaboration in ethnographic research. While broader definitions encompass any kind of research collaboration, in ethnomusicology in particular, research designs that prioritize collaboration and reciprocity at their core have been recognized as such in recent decades. The presented project is one example of how a collaborative methodology can be applied to address a specific research interest.

The constellation of collaborators is highly individual. In this paper, we have specifically highlighted challenges and ways of dealing with them that have arisen in our research. With this insight into our collaborative research practice, we aim to emphasize the uniqueness of each research constellation and provide inspiration for similar research designs.

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