



COMPOSER'S CORNER

Polyrhythmia in the Music of Cuba

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Upon reflecting about the presence of polyrhythmia in the music of Cuba, I would like to elaborate on my thoughts of how to comprehend the forces that make this polyrhythmia what it is today and talk about the influences of African music as one of the basic conditions that makes this possible. It is natural for the people of the region to listen and dance to three and four different rhythms that are running simultaneously without defining and breaking down the notion of a structured pulse.

These polyrhythmic complexities prevail not only in the music of Cuba but in the music of the Caribbean and some cultures of Latin America. In order to arrive at the polyrhythmic theories which I want to discuss, I feel it is necessary to synthesize my findings about the different influences of the cultures that were catalysts in the syncretic making of Cuban music. As Fernando Ortiz has pointed out,

El extraordinario vigor y la cautivadora originalidad de la musica cubana es creacion mulata... poseemos una gloria de tangos, habaneras, danzones, sones y rumbas, amen de otros bailes mestizos que desde siglo XVI salian de La Habana con las flotas para esparcirse por ultramar. Hoy baila music afrocubana, es decir, mulata, de Cuba, el mundo entero.¹

The extraordinary vigor and original captivation of Cuban music is a mulatto creation [i.e, the offspring of black and white races]... we possess a glory of tangos, habaneras, danzones, sones and rumbas, besides other mixed dances since the 16th century when they left *La Habana* (Havana) with flotillas to disperse over the seas.

Cuban music is a syncretic manifestation of a collision of cultural traditions merging and emerging, giving birth to the concept of *criollo*, also known as *creole*. At first rhythms and transplanted musical forms, later the subsequent fusions that begin to take their own shape. By the late nineteenth century, the musical expression in the cultures of Cuba and the Caribbean began to assert their own sovereignty.

The music of Cuba has been the result of a great *mélange* of influences from the African continent and European cultures, particularly Spain. Other cultural influences include Asia and to a very minimal or lesser known degree, the Amerindian cultures (the Indians that inhabited the region

¹ Fernando Ortiz, *Estudios Etnosociológicos* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1991), 25.

before colonial times). The European colonizers, including French, British, and Dutch also penetrated the islands of the Caribbean, and traces of their cultures are evident to this day.

Walter Wiora asserts that the music denomination “folklorica afrocubana” implies a national and ethnological concept.² The term “folklore” does not imply a national ethnologic group, but the basic extract of a given human society. Cuban musicologist Fernando Ortiz elaborates: “Folkloric music is not always anonymous. Folkloric music is either born in the individual artist or germinates spontaneously evolving in a gradual and unpredictable way.”³

To understand the music of Cuba is to embark in the study of the social and historical knowledge of the people that merged through times and the contributions they exerted.

Pre-Colonization

The Amerindians

There is almost no evidence of the Amerindian music influences on their Spanish colonizers. Siboneyes, Tainos, and Guanajatabibes comprised the most evolved cultures in the region. Historians’ accounts clearly mentioned archeological data such as several instruments used to accompany religious and social ceremonies called “areito.” The “areito” ceremony comprised large gatherings where activities alternated between call-and-response singing and dancing for long periods of times. These might last for days sometimes culminating in frantic dances accompanied by heavy drinking. The type of instruments used included wooden flutes (*flautillas*); sleighbell-like rattles made of wood containing small stones (a form of indigenous maracas); and long, hollow drums referred to as *atabales*. Among the *atabales*, the *Mayohuacán* was the most important drum, appearing very narrow with the length of an arm, made from the trunk of a tree, and having carvings on the side length resembling the shape of the letter H or T.

Traces of the culture disappeared entirely, leaving almost no evidence of the indigenous way of life. Within a century of the Spanish domination, the Caribbean Indians were all but extinct due to extermination and mass suicide. They preferred to perish by their own hand than succumb to the harsh treatment and domination of the foreigners.

The presence of the indigenous culture has been reduced to only a handful of words and names which remain as part of the Cuban vocabulary. Words such as *yuca*, *hamaca* (hammock), *tabaco*, and *Hatuey* are a part of everyday language. *Hatuey* refers to a cacique who valiantly defied the Spanish colonists. He preferred to die by fire rather than convert to Christianity.

² Walter Wiora, “Concerning the Conception of Authentic Folk Music,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Councils* 1 (1949): 15.

³ Fernando Ortiz, *La Africa de la Musica Folklorica de Cuba* (Havana: Ediciones Cardenas, 1950), 11.

Colonization

The Spaniards

Cristobal Colón brought with him in his expedition of 1492 a crew that included Castellans, Andalusians, Catalans, Galicians—a mixture from all the regions of the Iberian Peninsula—along with Italians, Jews, and a few British seamen. There was by most accounts a delegation made up of Europeans from around the continent, with a predominance of Spaniards due to the sponsorship of the Spanish monarchy.

As one culture perishes, in this case the Amerindians, and a dominant culture takes over, mainly the Spaniards, the colonizers begin to establish their own cultural traditions.

The music of the Spanish colonizers, which was transplanted into Cuba and continued until the island became an independent republic, includes popular songs, waltzes, mazurkas, classical music, church hymns, sea chants, zarzuelas, and regional dances. Many of their dances were forms of *zapateados* (a type of dance using the feet to tap out rhythmical patterns). The main instruments introduced during this period were predecessors of the modern guitar such as the *laud* and the *tiple*. Musical concepts consisted of harmonic accompaniments, ensemble playing, and written and oral transmission of Spanish traditional music.

By the sixteenth century, the bandola was the recognized accompanying instrument for popular songs. By the eighteenth century, *boleros* and *seguidillas* were accompanied by different types of plucked instruments. In discussing the music of Cuban farmers, Peter Manuel talks about the music of the *guajiros*.⁴ He argues that their music “derives primarily from Spanish and Canary Island origins, as is reflected in its reliance on guitars and mandolin-like instruments and its frequent use of the *décima*.” The *décima* is an old Spanish derived verse form based on a ten-line stanza improvisation and used by the *guarijos*. Performances of *décimas* were highly competitive—the performers would attempt to prove their cleverness by outdoing or insulting each other in their improvised verses. These *décimas*, formerly elements of high culture presented through Spanish theatre, were developed by Cuban peasants into a variety of styles, called *punto guajiros*. The *punto guajiros* were vehicles by which politics and events of social significance were conveyed. Some of the modal scales used in the region of Andalucía in Spain became the basic harmonic tools for the *campesino* (farmer) songs. One of Cuba’s most popular songs, *Guantanamera*, is an example of an early-twentieth-century Hispanic-derived folk song called *guajira*. The *guajira* is also accompanied by the guitar or similar plucked string instruments.

⁴ Peter Manuel, *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1995), 29.

The Africans

Los negros trajeron con sus cuerpos sus espíritus, pero no sus instituciones, ni su instrumental. Vinieron multitud de negros con multitud de procedencias, razas, lenguajes, culturas, clases, sexos y edades, confundidos en los barcos y barracones de la trata y socialmente igualados en un mismo régimen de esclavitud.⁵

The negroes brought with them their bodies, their spirits, but not their institutions nor their instruments. A multitude of negroes came from a multitude of places, races, languages, cultures, classes, sexes and ages, confused in the ships and barracks of the treaty and socially equal in a same regime of slavery.

As the Amerindians of the New World were becoming extinct, the Spaniards found it necessary to replace the manpower to work the land and fill the void that the Amerindians left behind. Prior to the discovery of the Americas, African slave trading was nothing new to the Europeans. Before the ninth century, many Africans in Al Andalus, Iberian Peninsula, were traders and held significant court positions, such as ambassadors. The struggle for the recapture of the Peninsula from the eighth century through the discovery of the Americas included the domination of the Christian warriors over the Moors, enslaving whites, browns, and blacks alike. From the sixteenth century through slavery's end in the nineteenth century, millions of Africans were brought to the Americas in chains.

When the African slaves arrived in Cuba, they had been separated from their material world and so had only their memories to call their own. When attempting to reproduce the musical tools they once had, such as drums, they made do with substitutions. In their quest for reproducing their cultural heritage, a certain amount of mixed elements emerged giving birth to a new syncretic result.

It is significant to note that by the beginning of the 1800's slavery was declining in the colonized regions. For example, the British colonies ended their slave importation by 1804 and by 1860 there were no more African-born slaves in the United States. In Cuba, however, the slave trade continued through the 1870's and thus there was a constant infusion of native African culture. Africans were brought from all over the African continent including Guinea, Congo, Angola, Zanzibar, Mozambique and Senegambia among many others. Such a transfusion of diverse cultures and languages between these African nations led to a synthesis of their own primary cultures.

The overall contribution of the Africans in Cuba has been immense. Their sheer force of strength with respect to manpower, specifically in the sugar cane fields, made it possible for Cuba to be a vital part of the world economy. They were significant in the movements for independence, and their influence in cooking traditions, vocabulary, oration, religion, and the arts.

The basic roots of Cuban music, from colonial times to the present republic, go through a large and complex evolution based on the African rhythms brought to the island by the slaves. In a broader spectrum, African rhythms have influenced musical styles and rhythms in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States.

⁵ Ortiz, *Estudios Etnosociológicos*, 24.

From the beginning of their enslavement through their emancipation, the Africans brought with them their folklore and sang their anguish, replacing their traditional songs, mixing their own dialects, and inserting new words (including from their newly acquired Spanish) that depicted their plight. They were not permitted to talk out loud and so conversed through music, song, and dance. Examples of this include call and response songs *cantos de trabajo*, *cantos de puya* (or *makaguas*) and *toques congos de yuka* (traditional drummings)”⁶ The Africans possessed vast musical facilities and were soon engaged by the colonizers as performers. Some sang in church choirs, danced, or were used as interpreters of *seguidillas*, minuets, polkas, and traditional music imported from Spain and other European cultures.

European Influences

A vast amount of musical and dance inventions emerged in Cuba through the process of amalgamation of disparate elements. Lyrical lines reminiscent of European, particularly Spanish, singing sometime intertwined with rhythmical traces of African indigenous rhythms. Some of these inventions first appear in the cries of the black street vendors in the sixteenth century. Selling vegetables, flowers, and fruits, these vendors would offer their *pregones*, or songs that described and advertised their goods in a highly stylistic manner. These *pregones* became part of a popular cultural form in music and poetry later immortalized in the works of poet Nicolas Guillén and by such song classics as *El Manicero* by Moises Simons, and *El Yerbero Moderno* sung by Cuban singer Celia Cruz.

From the beginning of slavery, the Africans demonstrated an inherent ability for learning and performing the music of the colonizers. By the early eighteenth century, a great number of blacks and mulattoes had gained their freedom through their musical abilities. They were engaged as performers in popular celebrations as well as religious observations. The rhythmical influence of the slaves began penetrating the entire country.

Much as the slaves were beginning to influence their new environment, so were the Europeans creating an impression on them. This is evident in their cradle songs, or lullabies, known as *canción de cuna* or *nana*. The texts of these songs were in a rough rendition of Spanish words with the first taste of Creole rhythmical presence. These songs grew to be very popular among the slaves and the people of color. The *canción de cuna* has become a classic and has influenced the works of twentieth-century writers, including national poets such as Guillén and Emilio Ballagas. *Drume negrita* by composer Ernesto Grenet, *Ogguere* by Gilberto Valdés, and *Lacho* by Facundo Rivero are works that continue to be performed on concert stages throughout the world.

The early nineteenth century witnessed the arrival of the European *contradanza* in Cuba. It was introduced to Havana through the Spanish settlers and reinforced by the arrival of the first

⁶ Jorge Castellanos and Isabel Castellanos, *Cultura Afrocubana* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1994), vol. 4, 271.

French colonizers from Haiti. The *contradanza* retained its basic structure for several decades and was slowly transformed by the infusion of Afro-Cuban rhythms. As noted by Buenaventura Pascal Ferrer,

Nada tiene de extraño que a la contradanza de escuela francesa se le adaptara el ritmo nuestro, tal como pasa con algunas piezas de cuadro, ajenas al país...⁷

There is nothing strange in that the French school contradanse has adapted our rhythm [i.e, Cuban rhythm], like what happens with some *piezas de cuadro* [referring to a structured kind of choreographed dance piece] that have nothing to do with our country.

Almost simultaneously at the beginning of the 19th century, an insurrection in Haiti drove many Haitians to the eastern province of Cuba, known as Oriente. The *contradanza* became the first step towards a nationalistic style in Cuban music. Composer Manuel Saumell (1817-1870), a conservatory-trained musician, was the first to utilize the *contradanza* in a collection of works for solo piano, which has remained standard in classical piano repertoire. There the Cuban *contradanza* was infused with the percussive *cinquillo* rhythms of the Haitian voodoo rituals. This evolved into the widely accepted version of the Cuban *contradanza*. By the end of the century, the *cinquillo* had become a vital rhythmic element in compositions such as the *danzón* and *bolero*.

The *cinquillo* is a melodic-rhythmic formula comprised of alternating eighth and sixteenth notes in 2/4 time, which is typical of Arara music. An explanation of the Araras by Abelardo Hall Estrada, a contemporary ethnomusicologist, explains that the cultural heritage of black people from Dahomey, now Benin, are also known as the Araras. They grouped themselves mostly in the province of Matanzas in Cuba, where they were brought as slaves to work in the sugarcane fields. The *cinquillo* pattern is found in Haitian and Dominican rhythms, known respectively as *cocoyé* and *merengue*.⁸

African Influences

The slaves learned to play European instruments and follow their musical traditions yet they did not want to lose their own heritage. By the mid nineteenth century, they had become enmeshed in the life of the Catholic Church, which aided the Africans in the creation of social clubs, or *cabildos*. Joseph Murphy explains

The *cabildos* were societies of blacks, slave and free, organized by the church for the purpose of religious instruction and mutual aid. Each was made up of Afro-Cubans of the same nación.... For their members, the *cabildos* functioned as societies for mutual aid and as social clubs for entertainment and religious devotion.⁹

The *cabildos* functioned to preserve and reconstruct the African heritage and traditions as well as aiding in social functions such as funeral arrangements and even assisting in the purchasing of their members' freedom as *coartados*. *Coartación* was a means by which a slave could purchase his or her

⁷ Cited in Alejo Carpentier, *La Música en Cuba* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1946), 163-164.

⁸ Castellanos, *Cultura Afrocubana*, vol. 4, 328.

⁹ Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: An African Religion in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 29.

freedom legally from their master. Celebrations for significant holidays were held, and here the Africans would conduct their drumming sessions according to their nation's rhythms. It was in the Yoruba *cabildo* that the Catholic saints were syncretized with the Yoruba deities to form the Afro-Cuban religion known as *Santería*.

The *cabildos* also served as places of experimentation, where African, European, and Creole elements would combine to ultimately become the mulatto presence in the music of Cuba. During times of celebration in the main city centers, blacks would be granted license to bring their ensembles and dancers outside of the *cabildos* to partake in the festivities. Their own gatherings were held on Sundays, which was the day of rest, and they would have annual celebrations which united the different African nations. During these events they would hold contests to name the Kings and Queens and select the *cabildos* that best represented their own traditions. The main nations depicted in the *cabildos* were the Yoruba (or Lucumí), the Congo (or Bantú), the Abakuá (or Carabalí), and the Arará (or Dahomeyan). By 1800 there are accounts that these performers were renowned attractions in Santiago de Cuba, the main city in the eastern part of the island. Manuel Palacios Estrada described them as part of “parsimonious parades that imitated a sovereign court, they left their imaginary mansions so the people would see them and admire them.”¹⁰

The Comparsa

In his 1864 book *Un artista en Cuba*, the English traveler Walter Goodman recalled the *comparsas*:

Lo principal que tiene el carnaval de Santiago son las comparsas callejeras, o conjuntos de enmascarados o mamarrachos como se les llama en lenguaje criollo, y los bailes de máscaras.

The principal attraction in Santiago's carnival are the street *comparsas*, or the masked ensembles or *mamarrachos* (jesters) like they are called in the language of the Creole and the masked dances.¹¹

In times of festivities, the *comparsas* would gather like a big parade led by a director who would give orders with the aid of a tin whistle. Following the director came *la farola*, a tall pole adorned with bright colors displaying the theme of the *comparsa* and moving to the rhythm of the drums. The *comparsas* featured revelers wearing elaborate costumes, makeup, and masks advancing in short steps singing and sometimes exhibiting choreographed movements. Then came the musicians followed by the multitude of city people, called *arrolladora*, that chose to join the parade.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the *comparsas* in Santiago de Cuba were very significant during Carnival season. Most prominent among the *comparsas* were the Carabalí and the Congo. There were great differences in the instruments chosen to comprise their musical ensembles. The drums used by the *comparsa Carabali* included *el quinto* (high-pitched drum used for calling), *la respondedora* (for the response), *el fondo* (lower-pitched drum providing a foundation for the sound)

¹⁰ Castellanos, *Cultura Afrocubana* vol. 4, 282.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 283.

and *el bombo* (the lowest-toned drum). This was the bass drum adopted from the military orchestras (referred to as “white music”). They used sticks to hit the drums, metallic bars that kept the beat, a pair of *chachás* (rattle-like instruments), and small flutes. On the other hand, the most influential of the *comparsas* became the *comparsa Conga*. This employed two kinds of drums, the *bokú* drum and the *conga* drums. The *bokú* was a single-headed Creole drum, narrow and long, which would be hung from the shoulder and played with both hands. The double-headed *conga* drums were strapped behind the neck and played with one hand per head. The performers also added a *quinto* to the ensemble and sets of inverted cooking pans. The culminating moments of these *comparsas* happened when the *conga* rhythms would intensify, whereby the dancers would respond by increasing the pace of their steps. This new *conga* tradition in Santiago de Cuba made its way to La Habana, and in time it became an international dance style that would reach European cabarets as well as the United States.

Tumba Francesa

The Haitians, descendants of Dahomeyans (or Araras) who exiled themselves in Cuba, continued to bring with them their Afro-French syncretic music and the *tumba francesa*. According to a dictionary of the period written by Esteban Pichardo, the word *tumba* was previously known as *tango*, referring to congregations of blacks dancing to the sounds of their instruments and rhythms. A great number of *tumbas francesas* established themselves in the oriental part of the island, mainly Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo. Each *tumba* was identified by a specific designation, including “Cocoyé,” “Tívole,” “Pompadú,” and “Las Mercedes,” among others. These institutions branched out to many regions of the country, gaining popularity along the way.

The principal drum used in the *tumbas* was called *tumba* or *tambu*, a conical-shaped drum with a length of approximately four feet. The interior is hollow to the middle of the body, and the head is wrapped with goatskin. It is played with the hand and a small, cane-shaped stick. The *tumba* drum was used to keep the tempo while the voices intoned their syncretic songs. Some of the songs were sung in *patuá* (French-Creole), while others were a mixture of *patuá*, Spanish, and *Criollo* (Cuban-Creole).

The *tumba francesa* dance depicts a courtship where once the music begins a female dancer goes to the center of the floor and follows the beat of the drum at whatever speed the drummer may play. She dances until she becomes fatigued and is then replaced by another female dancer. This procedure continues until interrupted by the sudden entrance of a male dancer. He displays a vigorous yet elegant dance around the female dancer. Here again, the male dances until fatigue sets in, and the members of the gathering erupt in a loud, confused commotion as he leaves. At this point, everyone joins in the dance with great jubilation. These dances were the counterpart of the European contradance or minuet, flavored with the Haitians’ own rhythms and interpretations. Many of the dance and musical forms born of this encounter of cultures evolved into new styles that, originating

in the lower classes, gradually assumed greater sophistication and popularity as they were adopted by the upper class.

Cuban Music

In Cuba, the music begins to spring from a seasoning of its Creole ancestry, mainly, in this case the Cubans of Spanish and African descent. To this day, the basic characteristics of Cuban music and dance are a fusion of Spanish-influenced melodies blended with African rhythms, and aspects of the French *contradanse*. From this proliferation of musical genres we have the Cuban *contradanza*, the *habanera*, the *canción*, the *danzón*, the *danzonete*, the *rumba*, the *guaguancó*, the *guajira*, the *guaracha*, the *son*, and the *charanga*, among others.

The *rumba* makes its appearance in Cuba at the end of the nineteenth century. It was a popular form of music and dance performed primarily at the lower-class Afro-Cuban gatherings. Its forces comprised a pair of dancers, accompanied by a singer, chorus, three conga drums, and two pairs of hard wooden sticks (*palitos*), or *claves*. Many styles of *rumbas* emerged, and to this day, the *guaguancó* has taken its place among the most popular ones. The *guaguancó* has a lead vocalist who introduces himself with a kind of vocalise and proceeds to improvise texts and melodies as he desires. This is accompanied by one or two congas, each tuned differently, along with a third percussionist playing a distinctive rhythmic pattern with the *palitos* on the side of a drum. As he sings, the lead singer plays another pair of sticks, or *claves*, introducing yet another distinctive rhythmic pattern.

After the lead singer begins the *canto* (an elaboration on his improvisation in which the text can be about anything, from love songs to politics), he then cues the chorus to enter with a refrain. Then follows a call-and-response period referred to as the *montuno*. When the *montuno* begins, male and female dancers commence a sort of playful dance of seduction with a pantomime played out as the man makes advances towards the woman until he performs the *vacunao* (pelvic thrust), which completes the conquest portion of the dance. The *guaguancó* dancers are highly specialized and skilled performers, who must follow and improvise over the rhythms with superb accuracy.

The *son* arrived in Cuba in the first decades of the twentieth century, and from its beginning, it represented a blend of equal amounts of Spanish influences and Afro-Cuban-derived elements. When the *son* first appeared, the instruments primarily utilized were guitars and the *tres* (small guitar-like instrument), complimented by bongos and *marimbula* (African-derived thumb piano with bass register). It opened with a *bel canto* song style, followed by a *montuno* (in this case a simple harmonic ostinato) to accompany a vocal call-and-response structure. The *montuno* section used the *clave* sticks (in this case the percussion instrument), which were a trademark of the *rumba*.

From the 1940's to the present, Cuban music has continued to reinvent itself. Some of its legacies include outlets for social concerns, from the *guajira* to the current *nueva trova* (or *nueva canción*). It also embraces forms of rhythmic complexity such as the *mambo*, an outgrowth of the big-

band format of the swing era. One invention has succeeded another, from *conjuntos típicos* and *charangas* to the *danzon*, *chachachá*, and *salsa*, along with many other genres, including fusions with jazz, rock, and the sacred rhythms of Afro-Cuban *Santería*.

Afro-Cuban Sacred Music

Over the course of 350 years of the slave trade, Cuba had an influx of over 700,000 slaves made up of over 100 African ethnic groups. Towards the close of the nineteenth century, there were approximately fourteen African nations that had preserved their ethnic traditions in their *cabildos*. Of these nations, the three that exerted their influence over Cuban music, dance, and religion were the Abakuá (Carabalí), the Congo (Bantu), and the Yoruba (Lucumí).

In the early twentieth century, the *cabildos*, no longer under the auspices of the church, became more like underground religious societies, referred to as *reglas*. As these *reglas* became more established and the membership grew to include new generations of Cubans of African descent, their identities relied less and less on ethnic background and more on spiritual inclination. For example, in the Yoruba religion these societies were known as *reglas de ochas*, or *santería*, where membership was determined by the *orishas* (African deities) and could include anyone regardless of their ethnic origin.

In her book *El Monte*, Lydia Cabrera recalled conversations with elderly descendants of African nations in Cuba:

Somos hijos del Monte porque la vida empezó allí: los Santos nacen del Monte y nuestra religión también nace del Monte”, me dice mi viejo yerbero Sandoval, descendiente de *egwddos*, “Todo se encuentra en el Monte” - los fundamentos del cosmos-” y todo hay que pedirselo al Monte, que nos lo da todo.”¹²

We are the children of the forest because life began there: the Saints are born in the forest and our religion is also born in the forest”, my old herbalist Sandoval told me, descendant of the *egwddos*, “Everything is found in the forest” - the foundations of the cosmos - “and we have to ask everything of the forest, it gives us everything.

With these explanations given by the elder Sandoval, Cabrera concluded that the “forest is a concept equivalent to the fountain of life, universal Mother and that the forest is the same as the earth.”

Each *regla* performed the rituals specific to their religious observances. The Congolese were well known for their magic and problem-solving, while the Lucumí were involved with their deities, and the Carabalí were calling the mysterious voices of the spirits. The underlying path of the *regla*’s spiritual quest was the emphasis on nature using music and dance as integral parts of their ceremonies.

¹² Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2000), 13

The Abakuá (Carabalí)

The Abakuá, also known as *ñañigos*, were among the most famous of the *reglas*. Due to the secrecy of their ceremonies, the *ñañigos* were feared in the eyes of the public. This was one of the reasons that African cults were suppressed in Cuba at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Abakuá ceremonies depicted reenactments of rites of passage attributed to the African origins of their specific sect. In these ceremonies, however, it is only the *ireme* or *diablito* (literally “little devil”) that is allowed, and in fact ordered, to dance by the established priest. Most of their songs are performed by a soloist. There are many kinds of drums used by the Abakuá, some designated for music and dance and others that are played only in secret ceremonies, in which the drums personify sacred entities and only consecrated drummers may play them.

Among the musical drums used by the Abakuá is a set of four including the *bonkó enchemiyá* and three *enkomos*. The *bonkó enchemiyá* is the biggest (one meter high) and most important drum in the ensemble. One drummer plays with the hands while a second player hits the same drum with two sticks, known as *itones*. The largest of the *enkomos* is the *obiapá*, which initiates the ensemble’s performance, then the mid-size *yeremá*, which answers the *obiapá*, and the smaller *bibinkomé*, referred to as “un solo golpe,” or “strike only once.”

The most important drum of the secret ceremony is the *ekue* (named for a spiritual entity). According to Jorge and Isabel Castellanos,¹³ *Ekue*, the drum, is the materialization of the great secret, the incarnation of the almighty, which took the form of a fish. The *ekue* is played by rubbing the end of a *guin* (bamboo-like stick from a palm tree) on the top surface of the skin of the three-legged drum. Through the sound produced by this effect, the voice of the sacred spirit of *sikanekua* can be heard. The bodies of the drums are made out of cedar with goatskin tops.

There is another set of drums that symbolizes the *ñañigos*, wherein each drum personifies a specific supernatural being. Each are carried into the ceremonies by high *ñañigo* dignitaries adorned with rooster plumes. The drums are called *equeñón*, *enkrikamo*, *empegó*, and *saseribo*. With the exception of the *saseribo*, which is used for ritualistic purposes and never played, the *ñañigo* drums are all cylindrical in shape, with tension cords and wooden tuning pegs. The playing of these drums is usually one very simple solo rhythm. Rattle-like instruments are also used (*eriqundí*), along with iron bells (*ekon*) struck by small sticks. These two instruments, in addition to the *enkomos*, are used to play rhythms in 2/4 and do not elaborate or use variations. The vocal music of the Abakuá has very expressive lyrics and is delivered in a very rhythmical fashion, ranging from solo to recitation to choral works. These are generally accompanied by one sacred or symbolic drum, so as to include the mysteries of the spirit that reside in the sacred drum. All of the public rituals, including the dances of the *diablitos*, are played with four drums.

¹³ Castellanos, *Cultura Afrocubana*, 321.

The *ñañigos'* musical influence and renown reaches far into the “high art” classical-music world, as exemplified in Cuban composer Ernesto Lecuona’s masterpiece “Danza de los Ñañigos” for solo piano.

The Congo (Bantu)

Like the Abakuá, the Congos also had their own sacred music but with very different characteristics. The music of the Congos is flexible in its ability to be syncretized with many other influences yet it retains its own distinct properties. Their songs of invocation contained a combination of Bantu, Spanish, and Creole words. The songs are interpreted by soloists and/or solo and chorus. Most of the solo work is performed at the beginning of the ceremonies. The vocal music, comprised of small motifs, displays rapid melodic movement. There is a great diversity of songs, some of them for open religious ceremonies and others for secret ceremonies.

The Bantu utilized three *makuta* drums: *cachimbo*, *caja*, and *mula*, which are played standing in an upright position. The *cachimbo* defines the beat while the *caja* produces loud sharp tones and the *mula* sets the tempo. The rhythms played with these drums are usually very fast. These drums were very important at the time, but they have long since been phased out. Another significant instrument is the *garabato*, which is a long stick with a “V”-shaped handle made from the branch of a sacred tree. It is used to tap rhythms on the floor while accompanying the songs in their mystical ceremonies. Other instruments used in the ensemble might include a pair of maracas, which would be attached to the wrists of the head drummer, as well as a bell and additional maracas. Yet another instrument is a small type of friction drum that is played by pulling a string through the middle of the drum head. This drum is called *kinfuiti*, a relative of the modern Brazilian *cuíca*. The rhythms produced by the *kinfuiti* were very important in the ritualistic ceremonies.

Because of their creative flexibility, the Congos, or Bantu, were exceptionally resourceful. If there was need for a drum in a ceremony and no drums were available, they would turn over a *taburete* chair (rustic wood furniture made with a seat of animal skin) and play on the seat as if it were a drum. At other times, the drums that served the ceremonies were three *ngomas*, or barrel-like drums with skins nailed over the top. These are the drums that evolved into the present-day congas, normally used for the Cuban *comparsas*. These include the *conga* (large), the *tumbadora* (medium), and the *quinto* (small). The only difference between these and the modern drums is that congas have skins that can be tuned by a system of metallic keys that exert tension on the drum heads.

[Entre los negros bantús] el ritmo musical es generalmente muy marcado y además se esfuerza por los instrumentos que acompañan al canto y por los movimientos de los danzantes: brazos que suben y bajan en cadencia ... pies que golpean el suelo a regulares intervalos, etc. ...¹⁴

¹⁴ Ortiz, *La Africanía*, 271

[Among the Bantu blacks] the musical rhythm is generally very marcato, and on top of that it is reinforced by the instruments that accompany the singing and by the movements of the dancers: arms that go up and down in a cadence ... feet that stomp the floor in regular intervals, etc. ...

The Congo had *makuta* dances that were danced to the drums of the same name. There were specific choreographic steps for the *makuta* drums. Another well-known dance that was used in their ceremonies was the beautiful *bandera*. This was led by a soloist, serving also as choreographer, singing, and carrying a large flag with all the participating dancers behind him. The dances would be performed in front of the altar of the *cabildo*, and the dancers with rhythmic vitality would follow the soloist's steps as they sang the refrains of their ceremonial songs.

Yoruba (Lucumí)

A series of wars from the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century led to the downfall of the Oyo Empire in Nigeria. This included invasions from the kingdoms of Dahomey and Fulani in the west and north, respectively, in which thousands upon thousands of Yorubas were captured and enslaved. In 1851 the American missionary Thomas Bowen stated that

It is true, that these wars, ... were not generally commenced for the sake of capturing slaves; but once begun, for political reasons, they have commonly been nourished by the slave trade.¹⁵

According to Joseph Murphy

Bowen witnessed terrible devastation among the Egba branch of the Yoruba people, who he said were enslaved in "multitudes" destined for Cuba and Brazil. Between 1820 and 1840, the majority of slaves shipped from the ports of Bight Benin were Yoruba.¹⁶

He goes on to cite that the Yorubas were victims of among others, the "insatiable demands of the planters of the New World.

¡Aggó Ilé! ¡Aggó Ya! ¡Aggó Olofi! ¡Olóum mbaa!

These are the ritual phrases and acknowledgements offered as simple invocations to the Yoruba deities as reproduced from Ortiz's opening statements of his lecture entitled *La Música Sagrada de los Negros Yorubas en Cuba* at the Conferencia de la Institución Hispanoamericana de Cultura on May 30, 1937. This is offered by the *babalawos* (Yoruba priests), master drummers, and members of the Yoruba religion prior to the performances of the sacred songs and drumming rituals. The invocations were to avoid offending the Yoruban spirits, so that they would not withdraw their compassionate benefaction.

The name Lucumí may have been adopted because of their way of greeting each other: *oluku mi* which means "my friend."¹⁷ Another belief is that most of the Yorubas came to Cuba from Niger,

¹⁵ Thomas J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856* (London: Frank Cass, [1857] 1968), 113.

¹⁶ Murphy, *Santería ...*, 21, 22.

where they were workers in the Lucumí factory. The Yorubas are noted to be the most educated, religiously advanced culture, one whose art reflected the influences of Mediterranean civilizations, including Crete, Cartagena, and Egypt.

The sacred songs and drums of the African Yoruba were retained in Cuba despite the attempts of the Catholic Church to impose their religious beliefs. Therefore, in order to preserve their sacred deities, the Yorubas employed the Catholic saints as masks for their own *Orishas*.

Santería

A new bilingual tradition emerged, at once a resistance to Catholic oppression and an accommodation to Catholic values. It came to be called *santería*, the way of the saints, because the devotions to the *orishas* were carried out beneath the images of the Catholic saints. ... a Catholic saint and a Lucumí *orisha* were seen as different manifestations of the same spiritual entity”.¹⁸

The ceremonial gathering of the Yoruba *santeros* and devotees celebrating the *orishas* is called a *bembe*. In *Santería* rituals, music, song, and dance are inseparable and are the principal means of communicating with the divinities. Singing is done by soloists and chorus. To communicate directly with the *orishas*, a soloist will sing a prayer in a soft voice that may be answered by either another soloist or by the chorus. At times, the chorus sings a partial statement of the soloist's song, and at other times, the chorus will sing a repetition of the statement previously sung by the soloist. The soloist in the Lucumí, known as *akpuón* or *gallo* (rooster), may or may not be a *babalawo* but rather a prominent member of that specific *regla de ocha*. The most important ceremonies are usually sung by a *babalawo*.

The main subject of the sacred songs of the Yorubas relates to stories of the *orishas* while they were alive. Sometimes the name of the *orisha* is invoked frequently throughout the song. Many of the songs have retained the original words, while some of the words have been transculturated or modified and some portions of the songs have been lost. Due to this process, the *akpuón* is permitted to improvise the missing segments and add them to what remains of the original song. In this sense, some of these sacred songs have gone through the same process of syncretism that other forms of Cuban music evolved into. Some of these sacred melodies at times become Creole and therefore contain traces of a mulatto popular Cuban music.

The most important drums of the Yoruba religion are the *batá* drums. These *bimembranófonos* (two heads at either end of the drum) are of a clepsydra-like shape (water clock), with the heads made of goat or deerskin. The drum is laid across the lap of the player with the heads on either side. The heads are of two different sizes and have connecting cords that control the tension between the two heads (made from the skin of a bull). The names of the drums from the largest to smallest are

¹⁷ William R. Bascom, *Shango in the New World* (Austin: University of Texas, African and Afro-American Research Institute, 1972).

¹⁸ Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: An African Religion in America*, 32.

iyá, also known as *tambor madre* (mother drum). Then come the *itotele* and the smallest, *okónkolo*. Surrounding the heads of the *iyá* are sleigh bells and small bells that are attached to the skins of the two heads.

The *batá* drums are tuned in an elaborate manner. The small head of the *iyá* is tuned to A4, and the large head is tuned to F2. The *itotele* has both heads tuned as a major third, i.e., E and G#. The *okónkolo* is tuned in unison on B3. This creates a bitonality over a constant E-major pedal. The complexities of *batá* drumming produce a multitude of tonal, rhythmic, and musical effects intertwined. The display of tones of the six different heads and the manipulation of the tones by the drummers create a very integrated tonal and rhythmical serial environment. The sonorities are powerful and haunting, giving the illusion of an orchestral effect.

The drums played in sacred rituals are consecrated and can be played only by chosen master drummers. These drums are consecrated with special rituals before they are constructed. Once they are baptized, they are ready to receive the spirits (*añas*) that will reside inside the drum. The unconsecrated drums are played in the more general *bembes* and other celebrations.

In a drumming session, there may be a vast amount of rhythms designated to call and speak to a chosen deity. There are twenty-four specific drumming patterns dedicated to the *orishas*, which evolve into about fifty-seven distinct variations. Each *orisha* has a specific pattern with which it is to be called, to initiate any further communication with that *orisha*. The *iyá* is the drum that speaks to the *orishas* by attempting to reproduce the sounds of the Lucumí language. The other two drums support the rhythmical climate for the dialogue.

Ensembles may include *bembe tambores* (cylindrical drums of various sizes) along with *chekeres*, bells, whistles, maracas, and various other percussion instruments.

In Yoruba, *oro* or *oru* means conversation. This is the ensemble of songs and drumming with which the *orishas* are saluted. The most important *oro* is the secret of *igbodú*, which is played privately before the ceremony is open to the public. The twenty-four salutations to the *orishas* are played in a predetermined divine order: *Eleguá*, *Oggún*, *Ochosi*, *Obaloke*, *Inle*, *Babalú-Ayé*, *Osain*, *Osun*, *Obatalá*, *Dadá*, *Oggué*, *Agayú*, *Orula* or *Ifá*, *Ibeyi*, *Oricháoko*, *Changó*, *Yewá*, *Oyá*, *Ochún*, *Yemayá*, *Obba*, *Oddúa*.

There are eleven major African *orishas* in the Yoruba pantheon. These deities are represented by their corresponding Catholic saints:

1. *Eleguá* : Guardian Angel or Saint Anthony of Padua (messenger, trickster, controller of fate)
2. *Oggún* : Saint Peter (iron, war)
3. *Ochosi* : Saint Norbert (hunter, jails)
4. *Babalú-Ayé* : Saint Lazarus (healer)

5. *Obatalá* : Our Lady of Mercy (peace, purity)
6. *Agayú* : Saint Christopher (volcano)
7. *Orula or Ifá* : Saint Francis of Assisi (wisdom, destiny)
8. *Changó* : Saint Barbara (force)
9. *Oyá* : Our Lady of Candelaria (protection against death)
10. *Ochún* : Our Lady of La Caridad del Cobre (love)
11. *Yemayá* : Our Lady of Regla (maternity and the sea)

Every *orisha* has its own specific dance, with the steps and movements of the dance representing the attributes of each *orisha*. For example, the dance to Yemayá, the goddess of the seas, conveys a movement that goes from side to side as though symbolizing the waves, with the arms in a rowing motion. The dance of Eleguá is very buffoon-like, with extreme emotion in which the dancer occasionally dances on one foot with the arms indicating contrary motion. The dances of the Yoruba deities express the dynamism of the *ashe*. According to Joseph M. Murphy,

The sacred world of *santería* is motivated by *ashe*. *Ashe* is growth, the force toward completeness and divinity... *Ashe* is the absolute ground of reality... *Santeros* speak of Olodumare, the Owner of Heaven, the Owner of all Destinies. Olodumare is the object of *ashe*, the ultimate harmony and direction of all forces... *Santería* is a danced religion because dancing expresses the fundamental dynamism of *ashe*.¹⁹

Polyrhythmia

The inherent rhythmic complexities in the African music brought to Cuba imparted an incredible sophistication to the music that we refer to now as Cuban music. From the Abekuá to the Arara to the Yoruba, these rhythmical complexities subliminally embedded themselves in the consciousness of the people. A people that became mulatto by the infusion of cultures in a natural and organic process of syncretic manipulation. It is as if musical ideas jumped from one extreme to the other and found a common thread of possibilities creating a diaspora of amalgamated offspring.

The polyrhythmic process of two or more different pulse patterns combined is a common element in many genres of Cuban music. The typical rhythmic organization of a complex rhythmic pattern may be broken in cells of binary and ternary divisions. These may be carried out by independent lines that are played simultaneously without provoking a rhythmical chaos. One of the controlling devices of this rhythmical organization is exerted by the concept of *clave*.

The Clave

Clave in this case refers to a distinctive rhythmic pattern as opposed to the percussion instrument made of two wooden sticks. It functions as a kind of metronomic device that is superimposed over

¹⁹ *Santería: An African Religion in America*, pp. 130-131.

the binary and ternary independent lines. Through this *clave* device, the independent lines merge and coexist. The *clave* acts like a magnet that pulls the divergent lines together.

The expert musicians and/or drummers who perform *rumba*, *guaguancó*, *salsa*, and many other forms of Cuban music have internalized the integral coordination of their individual patterns. These musicians respond to the *clave* the same way that any given musician responds to the notion of time signature. The standard pattern of a *clave* does not necessarily need to be of a specific number of beats. However, the *clave* pattern does refer to a specific repeated rhythmical phrase that has a clearly identifiable beginning and end. The musicians recognize the *clave* immediately. Each musical form is dictated by its own distinctive *clave*. If a musician is not fluent in the standard pattern of a given *clave*, he or she could get profoundly lost or play contrary to the motion of the *clave*, thereby precipitating the collapse of the overall rhythmical pattern.

In Cuban dance music, there are two basic *clave* patterns: the more prevalent is the “two-three” followed by the “three-two.” It is usual that in a *charanga*, *conjunto* orchestra, or any given ensemble that the *clave* pattern is played a musician with a pair of sticks, or a set of *claves* (percussion instrument). However, in dance forms such as *mambo* and *salsa*, the distinctive *clave* pattern is not physically played. Even if the audible pattern is not present, the musicians intuitively maintain the pattern in their minds.

The dexterity of these musicians is such that once these multi-linear complex rhythms are in place, soloists are able to improvise freely on top of this rhythmical foundation. They know precisely when to enter and when to get out of the *clave*, creating a spectacular and virtuosic improvisation.

Closing thoughts

... desde que nos vino de Europa en las naves de la Conquista. Como en tiempos de Cervantes y de Lope, devolvemos enriquecido y magnificado, lo que del Viejo Continente se nos trajo... Y la sensibilidad - la peculiar sensibilidad de quien nació *criollo* - habrá de manifestarse siempre ...²⁰

... since it came to us from Europe in the boats of the Conquerors. Like in the times of Cervantes and de Lope, we return enriched and magnified, what the Old Continent brought us...And the sensibility—the peculiar sensibility of the one that was born Creole—will always be manifested.

Cuban poet Nicolas Guillén stated that Cuba was a *pueblo mulato*. Creole, mulatto, a notion that is defined by the compositional forces that merge in a given place and surface as a syncretic manifestation. These manifestations have struck nerves in Cuban artists, poets, writers, and composers, compelling them to infuse these elements in their works. Cuban “high art” composers Amadeo Roldán, Alejandro García Caturla, and José White were among the first to introduce their mulatto syncretism in the world of symphonic music. The influence that crossed the ocean and in turn struck the nerves of American composers, such as Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Aaron Copland, George

²⁰ Alejo Carpentier, *Temas de la lira y el bongó* (Havana: Ed. Letras Cubanas, 1994), 39-40.

Gershwin, and Leonard Bernstein, along with many others from around the world. As Amadeo Roldán once explained to Henry Cowell,

Mis ideales son, ante todo, conseguir hacer un arte esencialmente americano... un arte nuestro, continental, digno de ser aceptado universalmente, no por el caudal de exotismo que en él pueda haber... sino por su importancia intrínseca, por su valor en sí como obra de arte..."²¹

My ideals are, above all, to be able to create an art essentially American... an art that is ours, continental, so dignified that it will be universally accepted, not because of the rich exoticism that it may contain... but for its intrinsic importance, for its own merit as a work of art...’.

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²¹ Published in Henry Cowell, *American Composers on American Music* (Stanford University Press, 1933) and cited by Castellanos, *Cultura Afrocubana*, vol. 4, 388.