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# Hard Conversations: Discussing Musical Transcription with our Interlocutors

# *Conversaciones Difíciles: Hablando de transcripción musical con nuestros interlocutores*

# *Conversas difíceis: Discutindo a transcrição musical com os nossos interlocutores*

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**Keywords**
Transcription
Afro-Brazilian Music
Claves
Timelines
Orkestra Rumpilezz

**Abstract**
This article examines the role of transcription within ethnomusicology, situating it as both a crucial methodological tool and a site for critical dialogue between transcribers and musicians. While acknowledging the historical critiques of transcription's subjectivity and potential for misrepresentation, it advocates for a collaborative approach that fosters (hard) conversations about musical structure, inspiration, authorship, and cultural context. The author proposes a framework wherein transcribers and musicians work together to refine and discuss transcriptions, echoing the collaborative efforts of Richard Widdess and Ritwik Sanyal (Widdess 1994) and Phillip Ciantar and Frans Baldacchino (Ciantar 1996) in their exploration of improvised performance. Drawing on his interactions with Letieres Leite, the late director of Orkestra Rumpilezz, the author reaffirms transcription's relevance in contemporary ethnomusicological research while addressing the complexities of (mis)representation in musical analysis.

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**Hard Conversations:**
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***Conversaciones Difíciles:***
***Hablando de transcripción musical con nuestros interlocutores***

*Conversas difíceis:*
*Discutindo a transcrição musical com os nossos interlocutores*

**Palabras clave**
Transcripción musical Música afro-brasileira
Claves
Líneas de tiempo
Orkestra Rumpilezz

**Resumen**
Este artículo examina el papel de la transcripción en la etnomusicología, considerándola tanto una herramienta metodológica crucial como un espacio para el diálogo crítico entre transcriptoras/es y músicas/os. Si bien reconoce las críticas históricas a la subjetividad de la transcripción y su potencial de tergiversación, aboga por un enfoque colaborativo que fomente conversaciones (a veces difíciles) sobre la estructura musical, la inspiración, la autoría y el contexto cultural. El autor propone un marco en el que investigadores/as y músicos/as trabajen conjuntamente para refinar y debatir las transcripciones, siguiendo el ejemplo de los esfuerzos colaborativos de Richard Widdess y Ritwik Sanyal (Widdess 1994) y Phillip Ciantar y Frans Baldacchino (Ciantar 1996) en su exploración de la interpretación improvisada. Basándose en sus interacciones con Letieres Leite, el difunto director de la Orkestra Rumpilezz, el autor reafirma la relevancia de la transcripción en la investigación etnomusicológica contemporánea, abordando al mismo tiempo las complejidades de la representación en el análisis musical

**Palavras-chave**
Transcrição
Música afro-brasileira
Claves
Linhas-guia
Orkestra Rumpilezz

**Resumo**
Este artigo examina o papel da transcrição em etnomusicologia, situando-a como uma ferramenta metodológica crucial e um espaço para o diálogo crítico entre transcritores e músicos. Ao mesmo tempo reconhecendo as críticas históricas à subjetividade da transcrição e ao seu potencial de distorção, o artigo defende uma abordagem colaborativa que promova discussões incómodas, mas produtivas, sobre estrutura musical, inspiração, autoria e contexto cultural. O autor propõe uma estrutura na qual pesquisadores e músicos trabalham juntos para refinar e discutir as transcrições, ecoando os esforços colaborativos de Richard Widdess e Ritwik Sanyal (Widdess 1994) e Phillip Ciantar e Frans Baldacchino (Ciantar 1996) em suas explorações da performance improvisada. Com base em suas interações com Letieres Leite, o falecido diretor da Orkestra Rumpilezz, o autor reafirma a relevância da transcrição na pesquisa etnomusicológica contemporânea, ao mesmo tempo que aborda as complexidades da representação na análise musical.

Transcription and analysis of audio or audiovisual materials collected in the field or commercially released have been one of the main techniques used by ethnomusicologists since the early twentieth century when the discipline was known differently. In fact, many ethnomusicologists recognize the ability to transcribe music as one of the discipline's signature methods (Nettl 2015: 72–88). This approach, however, has been criticized for being too subjective, that is, for reflecting mainly the transcriber's point of view rather than the musicians' (England 1964, Jairazbhoy 1977), for being reductive and positivist (Seeger 1958, Marian-Balasa 2005) and, more generally, for not offering reliable representations of the sounds they purportedly stand for (List 1974). These critiques have been particularly sharp when Western staff notation is applied to transcribing of oral traditions (Serwadda and Pantaleoni 1968, Koetting 1970, Allgayer-Kauffmann 2005). The critique has helped us ethnomusicologists become aware of our own biases, of issues of (mis)representation, and the possible reproduction of colonial ideologies that privilege European forms of knowledge. One of the effects of these critiques was an increased focus on the contextual, cultural, and political aspects of musical practice, reflected in a decreased use of musical transcriptions in ethnomusicological publications since the 1980s, as documented by Kofi Agawu (2005), Gabriel Solis (2012), Jason Stanyek (2014), and Leslie Tilley (2018).

Of course, scholars did not entirely abandon transcription and musical analysis. In an article titled "How We Got Out of Analysis, and How to Get Back In," Leslie Tilley (2018) writes that, despite the "Still-shaky position of musical analysis in Ethnomusicology," resulting from the anthropological turn of the discipline at the middle of the twentieth century, "I am continually surprised at how many ethnomusicologists—when I talk to them at conferences—admit to being interested in music theory and analysis, because I do not hear about it in their papers" (Tilley 2018: 966, 968). After explaining the far-ranging implications of the cultural studies paradigm in ethnomusicology, she noted that "Most of the analytical studies published in the last few decades fly in the face of the so-called anthropology musicology divide, and many scholars are attempting to amalgamate music theory with social theory in their writings" (ibid.: 969). Because Tilley sees transcription as integral to musical analysis (ibid.: 956–57), we can conclude that the practice of transcribing music continued to be central to many ethnomusicologists, even when they embraced social theories. Likewise, in an article with the same title as Tilley's, Kofi Agawu (2005) explains that in the 1990s, many music scholars previously intimidated by critiques to musical analysis emerged with "piles of [analytical] work ready to be published" (Agawu 2005: 267).[1] Michael Tenzer, one of transcription's most ardent defenders, argues that musical transcription is an unparalleled "immersion vehicle for musical encounters with what is unknown to us" (2017: 169–70) with research and educational applications. The kind of immersion and focus it demands forces transcribers to internalize and

[1] One of the leading voices of criticism against musical analysis (and by association, against transcription too) in musicology and ethnomusicology during the 1980s and 1990s was Joseph Kerman (1980, 1985).

embody music in ways that are unusually deep, he tells us. Tenzer is firmly rooted in twenty-first century discourse when he advises college teachers that:

> *The first thing to inculcate [in burgeoning transcribers] is awarenes that until one goes to the source of the music to learn it from its creators or checks a composer's score or reads about it in an expert's description, we can sometimes do no better than make guesses about how it is heard and understood in situ … But that is perfectly all right because the deductive process of discovery is fruitful. Indeed, sometimes it might be possible to discover structures that practitioners know only passively (Tenzer 2017: 179).*

In this essay, I side with Tenzer, Tilley, and those who support musical transcription as an essential tool for ethnomusicological research. My argument, nonetheless, takes a less transited route, as it reflects on the potential use of transcription as a springboard to initiate conversations with musicians about the details of musical creation and broader issues of creativity, authorship, ancestry, essentialism, and more. Thus, I argue for a collaborative use of transcription where transcribers and musicians in the field comment on, tweak, and critique transcriptions. This approach is similar in principle and purpose to that proposed by Richard Widdess in his collaboration with Indian *dhrupad* practitioner-scholar Ritwik Sanyal. During a three-month visit of Sanyal to London in 1988, they collaborated in the creation of transcriptions with the goal of "eliciting insights into the processes of improvised performance" (1994: 60). About the process, Widdess wrote that "he [Sanyal] and I were equal partners in the exercise in the sense that transcription and analysis proceeded by discussion and agreement, rather than by the interrogation or testing of an informant by an investigator" (ibid.: 61). A related case from the same period is Philip Ciantar's collaboration with Maltese *għana* singer Frans Baldacchino. Although Ciantar also strove for a horizontal partnership with Baldacchino, the method was different: "First, we decided on the recorded pieces that we were going to work together on. The next step was for me to transcribe the three pieces … The transcribed pieces were then discussed with the performer for further interpretative markings and a detailed explanation of them" (Ciantar 1996: 130). Because Baldacchino was not acquainted with the notational method used by Ciantar (staff notation), the transcriber "shifted to hand-movement communication to elicit the performer's ideas and opinions" (ibid.: 131). The collaboration I document in this essay is more aligned with that between Widdess and Sanyal than with Ciantar and Baldacchino's because, like Sanyal, my interlocutor was fluent in staff notation. From a different angle, my method resembles Ciantar's as the initial transcriptions were produced by the researcher alone. However, unlike Ciantar and Widdess, I did not involve my interlocutor in the selection of the pieces or passages to be transcribed and analyzed. Although my approach is admittedly less collaborative than Widdess's and Ciantar's, I argue that it has the same potential to elicit insights and stimulate conversations that may not have emerged otherwise.

The exchange reproduced and discussed in this essay is the last I had with Letieres Leite (1959–2021), the late founder, director, and composer of Orkestra Rumpilezz, an award-winning big band from Bahia, Brazil, that

served as a case study for my dissertation (Díaz 2014) and for various other publications (Díaz 2016, 2017, 2021, 2025a, 2025b). I met Leite in Salvador (Bahia's capital) in 2012 when I formally began fieldwork for my dissertation. During this visit, I spent six months attending performances, weekly rehearsals and interviewing the orchestra's director and some of its members and audiences. During the writing and analysis phase, I spent approximately two months exclusively transcribing the textures of the pieces of their first album (*Letieres Leite & Orkestra Rumpilezz* 2009). As the orchestra's repertoire grew, I continued using transcription as the primary technique to gain insight into musical style and structure. In face-to-face conversations with Leite during my visits to Bahia (2012, 2016, and 2018) I used the insights I gained from my transcriptions to ask him pointed questions about musical structure. For instance, I remember telling him how I noticed that his piece "Feira de Sete Portas" utilizes a bell pattern that is like the *ijexá* bell pattern but slightly shortened (see Example 1). He would be consistently impressed by these kinds of questions, appreciating that I had spent time and energy studying his music. My reward would be nuggets of information such as his explanation of the relationship between this piece's bell pattern and the drum parts (see Example 2). However, later, I learned that, although these conversations furthered my understanding of his music, they masked certain aspects of musical creation and African ancestry of paramount importance for Leite.

| | 1 | | | | 2 | | | | 3 | | | | 4 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Ijexá* | x | x | | X | | X | X | | x | | x | | X | | X | |
| "Feira de Sete Portas" | x | x | | X | | X | X | | x | | x | | X | | | |

**Image 1**. Timeline of *ijexá* and "Feira de Sete Portas" (*A Saga da Travessia* 2016, track 6) in TUBS. These timeline patterns are played by a double-pronged bell called *agogô*. In this notation, the "x" and "X" respectively represent high- and low-pitched notes in the *agogô*.

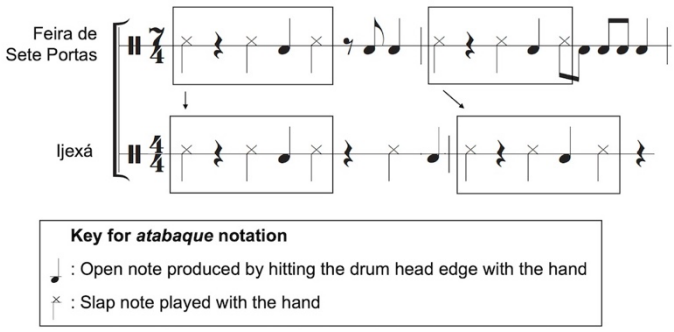



**Image 2.** Patterns of the master drum in Rumpilezz's "Feira de Sete Portas" (from A Saga da Travessia, track 6) and in the traditional ijexá groove. See Díaz (2021: 73) for a fuller discussion of these patterns.

The turning point occurred in May 2020 when I reached out to Leite via social media to double-check my transcriptions of some of his pieces, which were going to appear in my book *Africanness in Action: Essentialism and Musical Imaginations of Africa in Brazil* (two chapters of it are dedicated to Orkestra Rumpilezz). Specifically,

I asked him for feedback on my transcription of the timelines (clave-like patterns that serve as temporal organizers in his music) he used in his first two albums (*Letieres Leite & Orkestra Rumpilezz* 2009 and *A Saga da Travessia* 2016) as well as five transcriptions showing full textures of some of his pieces (see Díaz 2021, Chapter 4). In this article, I focus on the exchange about timelines because he was more engaged with these than with the other transcriptions I shared with him. This was expected: timelines were central to Leite's discourse, compositional practice, and understanding of African music (Díaz 2017: 6, Díaz 2021: 92–97, Leite 2017: 20–22). Leite was quick to correct some of my timeline transcriptions and reacted strongly to the associations I proposed between the original timelines he designed for "Banzo 1" and "Banzo 3" and some *Candomblé* timelines. In his response, he claimed authorship of these new timelines, enlightening me about his understanding of the historical use of timelines in Brazilian music, and re-explaining his compositional method for African-derived music in a level of detail that I have not heard in any interview (with me or others) or any public declaration of his. As shown below, he appreciated but criticized my alternative ways of listening to two of his pieces, emphasizing that the most important thing is understanding the composer's intentions rather than theoretical possibilities. I regard this as the most important lesson I learned from my exchange with him: Some of the ways in which we (ethnomusicologists) listen to and interpret music may be alienating for the musicians we work with. This is true even when those ways of listening seem insightful in drawing structural and historical connections between genres or repertoires.

In my book, I expressed affinity with Charles Seeger's (1924, 1925) idea that musicologists cannot know or study music adequately by using written or spoken language only because the kind of knowledge and messages that musicians communicate requires direct, embodied engagement with the musical substance (Díaz 2021: 6). I used that idea to justify my use of research techniques such as learning how to perform and compose music and transcribing music to gain insight about musical structure and compositional practices. Extending on that premise, here I contend that sharing our transcriptions with insiders is also a path to musical knowledge and insight into the musicians' perspectives. Moreover, I am persuaded that those conversations about our transcriptions with our interlocutors constitute a step *further* into gaining insight into musicians' intentions and knowledge. But this approach has risks: due to their subjective nature and graphic form, transcriptions conspicuously expose the researcher's biases to the reader's inquisitive eye—who, of course, has their own biases. Transcriptions also invite criticism because they give the appearance of freezing music (i.e., the transcriber's interpretation of music) in time and space. Therefore, it should not surprise us that by looking at our transcriptions, musicians may, at times, feel misinterpreted, misrepresented, and even alienated. And this can generate strong reactions in them, as it happened in my exchange with Leite. However, what can be gained is too great not to take the risk.

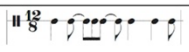
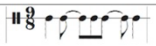
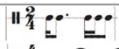
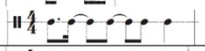
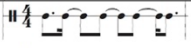
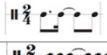
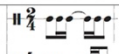
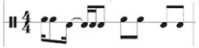
*The Exchange (May – June 2020)*

My exchange with Letieres Leite was in Portuguese and conducted over Facebook's Messenger. Leite communicated mostly through voice messages, and I used text messages. The translations are all mine. Sadly, Leite did not have the opportunity to respond to this essay—he succumbed to Covid-19 in October 2021 leaving an immense hole in the Brazilian musical scene. For context, I have added references to recordings and YouTube links of the discussed pieces. These were not part of our original exchange.

**Juan Diego Díaz (May 22, 2020)**: Dear maestro, I hope all is going well with you during this unusual and difficult period. I want to share with you that my book about Afro-Bahian music, where there are two chapters about the wonderful Orkestra Rumpilezz, is now in the phase of final revisions. I am very happy to be able to disseminate your work among Anglophone readers through this humble text. I was also wondering if you would be willing to take a look at my transcriptions of some of your pieces.

First, I would like to verify whether my transcriptions of the claves2 [timelines] in your first two albums are accurate. Please look at these charts. Do you see any mistakes?

[2] Leite uses the word "claves" generically to refer to timelines.

| **Piece in *Letieres Leite & Orkestra Rumpilezz* (2009)** | **Timeline** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| A Grande Mãe Balendoah | Vassi | 12/8 [x.x.xx.x.x.x] |  |
| Anunciação Adupe Fafá | Vassi (truncated) | 9/8 [x.x.xx.x.] |  |
| Floresta Azul | Aguere | 2/4 [xx..xxx.] |  |
| | Ramunha | 4/4 [x..x..x...x.x...] |  |
| Taboão | Samba duro | 4/4 [x..x..x...x..x..] |  |
| O Samba Nasceu na Bahia | Samba | 4/4 [.x.x..x.x.x.x..x] |  |
| | Kabila | 4/4 [x.xx.x.x.x.x.xx.] |  |
| | Samba Afro | 4/4 [.x.x..x...x...x.] |  |
| | Samba Chula | 2/4 [x..x..x.] |  |
| Temporal | Ilu | 2/4 [x.xx.xx] |  |
| | Ijexá | 4/4 [xx.x.xx.x.x.x.x.] |  |

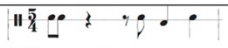
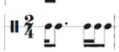
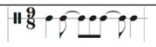
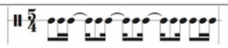
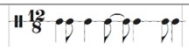
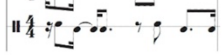
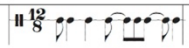
| **Piece in *A saga da travessia* (2016)** | **Timeline** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Banzo Parte 1 | Aguere (expanded) | 5/4 [xx...xx.x.] |  |
| | Aguere | 2/4 [xx..xxx.] |  |
| Banzo Parte 2 | Vassi (truncated) | 9/8 [x.x.xx.x.] |  |
| Banzo Parte 3 | Kabila (expanded) | 5/4 [x.xx.x.x.x.x.x.xx.xx] |  |
| Honra ao Rei | Vassi (rotated) | 12/8 [x.xx.x.x.xx.] |  |
| Professor Luminoso | Ijexá | 4/4 [xx.x.xx.x.x.x.x.] |  |
| | Clave dos mestres | 4/4 [.x.x.x....x.x..x] |  |
| Feira de Sete Portas | Ijexá (truncated) | 7/8 [xx.x.xx.x.x.x.] |  |
| Dasarábias | Vassi (rotated) | 12/8 [xx.x.x.xx.x.] |  |
| Mestre Bimba Visita o Palácio de Ogum | Capoeira | 2/4 [x..xx.x.] |  |
| | Vassi (truncated) | 9/8 [x.x.xx.x.] |  |

**Table 1.** The author's transcriptions of Rumpilezz's timelines in its first two albums (version 1).

**Letieres Leite**: I'll do it. By when do you need this? I am currently working on some commissioned arrangements, but I will do it with great pleasure. I will send you the corrections in case there are any.

**JDD:** No problem, maestro. Can you respond by the first week of June? Say by June 7?

**LL:** I'll do it before.

**JDD**: Wonderful.

**LL (June 22, 2020)**: I see that the [transcriptions of the] first album are correct, except for "Taboão," which is not called "samba duro." We call it "samba reggae." It is a traditional samba reggae that utilizes the military snare drum3.

In "Banzo 1" and "Banzo 3" there is something very serious that I need to tell you. Those claves are not connected with ancestral rhythms. In no moment I thought about ancestry [while composing these pieces]. They are hybrid claves that I created based on the principle that, it is possible to create a [new] clave and stick to that pattern in the arrangement in the same way that it is done with [traditional] claves. From a contemporary standpoint, I believe that you can create your own clave [and remain within the logic of African rhythmic aesthetics by basing your arrangement on that pattern]. To begin with, claves in five [beats] do not exist in the context of [traditional Afro-diasporic] Brazilian music[4].

What happens with "Banzo 3" and "Banzo 1" is that they are my inventions and creations based on the idea that it is possible to create a new clave while as far as we respect it during the arrangement, solo, and melodies. Again, these claves are my creation and invention. They do not have a precedent [i.e., they do not derive from other patterns]. Indeed, they are not meant to be applied in measures of five beats [as your transcription suggests]. For instance, I conceived "Banzo 3," in three measures of five beats each [resulting in a cycle of fifteen beats] rather than in cycles of five [measures of three beats each]. In the same way, "Banzo 1" can be thought of comprising cycles of five or ten. Therefore, they are hybrid claves, created [by me]. There are no precedents of this kind of time signature in Afro-Brazilian music. Therefore, there is no reason to compare them with any [traditional] Afro [African or African diasporic] rhythm.

What I want to say is that, if you have a system of claves as it happens in hip hop music or electronic music, where people make variations, it is possible to identify exactly your ancestry in some of them. Perhaps in others it is not possible to identify it if the music is built in time signatures that are incompatible [with traditional timelines]. For instance, there are claves in eleven or eighteen [beats] that you cannot find in African cultures in a clear and explicit way. You will not be able to find those [timelines in odd meters] here in Brazil. Maybe you can find them in other Latin American countries. In Venezuela they have it, I think. But not in Brazil. The clave designs that I created for "Banzo 1" and "Banzo 3" are hybrid. You can write [in your book] that they have an author, because they were created by me. That's the reality.

In "Banzo 2" you nailed it. It is a clave in nine [ternary subdivisions] that does not have precedents in Bahian music. There are no available recordings [featuring this timeline]. I looked for them. These ternary rhythms are

[3] Listen to "Taboão" (*Letieres Leite & Orchestra Rumpilezz*, 2009, track 5) available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7A1dAngZH4s
[4] Listen to "Banzo 1" (A Saga da Travessia, 2016, track 1) available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jf5g0uM0Fc0 and listen to "Banzo (A Saga da Travessia, 2016, track 3) available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh3laP7nrnY

more related to samba than to anything else. They are more related to the *kabula* [aka *kabila*] *toque*[5] [x.xx.x.x.x.x.xx.] or *samba afro toque* [.x.x..x...x...x.]. Then it feels like a ternary samba, rather than the typical ternary *vassi* [x.x.xx.x.x.x].[6] Therefore, it is the first time it [this adaptation] is done and as such, it is the intellectual property of Rumpilezz, of Letieres Leite. I would like you to highlight that [in your book]. Because it is important for me that you state that these claves were not used before in Brazilian music in this form. I don't mean that there are no "nines" in African music, because there are many, but not based on this Brazilian *vassi*, which people conceive in 12/8. That [kind of arrangement] has not been done before. According to various Brazilian researchers, the first song recorded with this clave was "Anunciação"[7]

In sum, correct the clave's name in "Taboão." It should be samba reggae. In the second album [*A Saga da Travessia*] there are two mistakes. First, the clave of "Banzo 1" is hybrid and created by Letieres Leite, thinking about a groove in five. This clave was created respecting the ancestral system of [African] claves. Second, the same happens in "Banzo 3." In neither case these claves work in their basic [conventional] form. In "Banzo 1" part of the orchestra follows a 10-beat cycle and others follow a 15-beat cycle. Each in their respective melodic lines. There is no precedent of the presence and use of these claves in our ancestral music.

**JDD**: Dear maestro. Thank you very much for answering my questions with so much detail, clarity, and patience. First, I would like to clarify that, after some ten years studying your work, I have come to appreciate it as one of the most important developments of Brazilian music in recent decades. In my book I aim to give you due credit for those contributions. I understand that the claves of "Banzo," "Anunciação" and many other Rumpilezz pieces, are your own creations and that will be properly acknowledged. When I interpret some of those claves as transformations of traditional Bahian claves, I do not intend to question your originality and authorship, but to show readers how your creativity continues to be rooted in Afro-Bahian music. As I see it, it is a process of creation and invention where you expand the language of Afro-Brazilian music, showing the possibilities that its structure can afford, always rooted in tradition. In short, I understand Rumpilezz's music as being your intellectual and creative property.

Due to the great impact that your work continues to have in Brazil, I think it is important that people in the [African] diaspora get to know it and, hopefully, become inspired by it to recreate their own musics based on their own Afro-diasporic traditions. This is one of the main goals of my work. In my book I will explain that there are no precedents of your claves in Bahia and that they are thus your sole invention. Additionally, I would like to

[5] *Toque* is the Portuguese word for rhythm or groove. *Kabila* or *kabula* is the name of a *toque* or groove heard in Candomblé houses of the Angola tradition in Bahia. The *kabila* timeline is [x.xx.x.x.x.x.xx.]

[6] *Vassi* [x.x.xx.x.x.x] is the most common timeline heard in *Candomblé* houses of the Yoruba tradition in Bahia. It accompanies toques for *Iansá, Oxalá, Xangô, Iemanjá,* and others.

[7] Listen to "Banzo 2" (A Saga da Travessia, 2016, track 2) available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjhFapf4TLE and listen to "Anunciação" (Letieres Leite & Orchestra Rumpilezz, 2009, track 2) available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOD8NCQ1RLM

orient readers about various ways of listening and thinking in relation to traditional Bahian claves. Not because that was your original intention, but because that shows how your creativity (and that of other diasporic musicians) is, in various ways, informed by tradition; in your case by Afro-Bahian tradition, jazz, and other genres as well. What do you think?

**LL**: I think you did not understand what I said. My preoccupation is not that [issues of authorship]. My preoccupation is a technical one. My preoccupation is that you gave the name of a [religious] entity [associated with] a toque, when I [originally] did not think about that toque. You associated "Banzo 3" to kabila and "Banzo 1" to aguere. No, no! I completely forgot about these [Afro-Bahian] toques when I composed "Banzo 1" and "Banzo 3." This is a purely contemporary work. Now, [that was done] based on the structural principle that characterizes African musics: Respecting clave. After you create it [any clave], you must follow the same parameters [of rhythmic construction] that you have in traditional African music. You are thus excessively [and unnecessarily] concerned with the origins of my claves when my preoccupation was a different one.

As for the clave in nine [beats, featured in "Banzo 2"], yes. It was based on *vassi*. You must make that very clear. I never denied that.

What I'm trying to say is that you associate "Banzo 1" and "Banzo 3" with *toques* that I had not even thought about. And they are not based on those *toques*. Those time signatures in five are based on a different clave in five that I often use, which I can send to you. I often use it in my arrangements, such as "Nanã" and "Canto pra Nanã." You can find them on the internet. Therefore, [time signatures in Afro-Brazilian music] in five are my creation[8].

Strictly speaking, "Banzo 3" is not in five (e.g., 5/4). It is important to explain that there are [melodic] lines in fifteen and in ten. There is no circular thought of five in this song [the song's periodicity is not five]. Even in the percussion, the *surdo* [bass carnival drum] plays a pattern of three measures of five [beats each]. So how are you going to explain that? I think that your reduction to present it in five does not reflect my thought. I thought about polyrhythm and extended chords. The clave [X.xx.X.x.x.X.x.xX.xx][9] was not inspired in an ancestral clave but on a design that would facilitate swing in the melodic lines. I composed melodies first in that piece [and then adapted a new clave to it].

I understand your respect for my creation, but that is not my preoccupation. My preoccupation is that you remain close to reality. I considered some claves as hybrid ones. I do not question your respect for my work, which spans over forty years. I know you respect it. Otherwise, I would have told you. I am very frank. I want to help you,

[8] Listen to "Nanã" (*Moacir de Todos os Santos*, 2022, track 5) available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzu9fyjH6nc&list=RDxzu9fyjH6nc&index=1 and listen to "Canto pra Nanã" (From show "Rumpilezz visita Caymmi," 2015) available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KY52La4mhnM

[9] In this notation the capital "X" represents *agogô* low notes and lowercase "x" stands for *agogô* high notes.

but let's do it right. "Banzo 1" and "Banzo 3" have *no* direct connection with ancestral claves. They are clear examples of [newly] created claves. Even though they can be seen otherwise.

**JDD**: I understand, maestro. "Banzo 1" and "Banzo 3" are your creations without connection to traditional *toques*.

**LL**: Correct. On the other hand, the origin of the clave of "Adupe Fafá" and "Anunciação" [and of Banzo 2"] is *vassi*, minus one beat [x.x.xx.x.]. I made it deliberately that way (see Example 3). Likewise, I truncated the *ijexá* clave [xx.X.XX.x.x.X.X.] to form the clave of "Feira de Sete Portas" [xx.X.XX.x.x.X.]. It is in seven [beats, or in 7/8]. But in "Banzo 1" and "Banzo 3" I was thinking about something else. I wanted to experiment by creating a hybrid clave that maintained the organizational rigor of musics of the African matrix. What is that rigor? Based on the clave, one creates the variations and the melodies and maintains all the music connected with clave. The system's rigor is the same. [In that way] the music continues to be based in the African system where clave is music's director. All arrangements are based on that clave and its variations. In other words, it is the same logic used in the *alujá*[10] or *aguere* grooves [from Candomblé.] The only thing changing is clave itself.

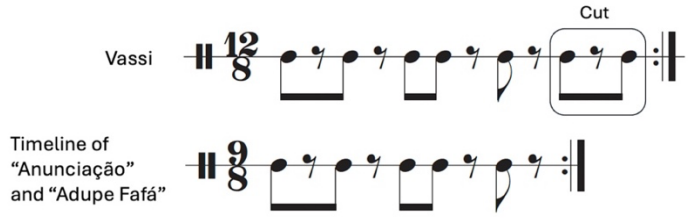



**Image 3.** *Vassi* bell pattern used in Bahian Candomblé superimposed with timeline of "Anunciação" and "Adupe Fafá" (*Letieres Leite & Orkestra Rumpilezz*, 2009, tracks 2 and 7). See Díaz (2021: 111–13) for a fuller discussion of these pieces.

**JDD**: Got it. However, I found fascinating the [theoretical] relationship between the clave of "Banzo 1" and aguere [a Candomblé groove for Orixá Oxossi]. Look at this transcription:

[10] *Alujá* is a *Candomblé* groove associated with *Xangô,* the Yoruba god of fire and thunder. The timeline of this groove is [x.x.xx.x.x.x].

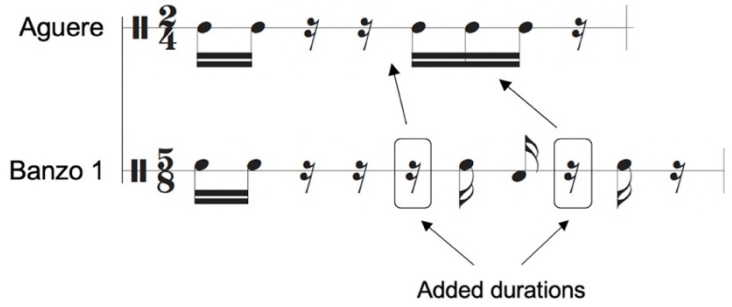



**Image 4**. The author's proposed relationship between the timelines of *agueré* and "Banzo 1." See also Díaz (2021: 96).

This is only to give you an idea of some of the ways I was hearing and thinking about the clave of "Banzo 1." One of the reasons why I associated "Banzo 1" to *aguere* is that the piece has two moments in which the *aguere* groove is played exactly as in traditional contexts[11].

**LL**: That's fine, but if you look [close enough] you will always find a relationship with *aguere*. I understand the relationship [you are pointing out]. But that was not my intention. Got it? You can [always] find relationships with various kinds of claves if you want. But you know why "Banzo 1" does not relate to *aguere*? Because the feel of *aguere* is *very* different. *Aguere* evokes one sentiment and support a specific kind of groove that "Banzo 1's" clave does not.[12] This [second] clave is more aggressive, compared to the softness of *aguere*. I had already noticed that both claves coincide structurally, as you point out. But my intention is not to connect it with *aguere*. The [first two notes at the] very beginning of the clave of "Banzo 1" resemble *aguere*'s clave. But they have a very different feel. The similarity is graphic, simply graphic, but not musical.[13] And for me, what matters most is the musical connection. That clave [Banzo 1's] sets up a different kind of cycle.

**JDD**: I understand. The similarity [between the claves of "Banzo 1" and *aguere*] exists on the paper, but not musically.

[11] Listen to two fragments of "Banzo 1" where the aguere groove is quoted literally (A Saga da Travessia, 2016, track 1, 1:33–1:38 and 2:18–2:23). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jf5g0uM0Fc0

[12] *Aguere* is a groove used in *Candomblé* worship houses of the Ketu (Yoruba) tradition in Bahia and other parts of Brazil. It is dedicated to *Oxossi*, the deity of hunting and the forest. Olga Cacciatore (1977: 41) described *aguere* as "a slow rhythm, played with the fingertips in the atabaque drums to summon Iansã to the terreiro." Ângelo Cardoso, however, noted that this association to *Iansá,* the goddess of wind and lightning, may have existed in the past, but is no longer relevant in contemporary practice (2006: 287). As most practitioners do nowadays, Leite correlates *aguere* with *Oxossi*, not *Iansá*. At any rate, Cardoso (2006: 291) confirms that *aguere* is a gentle rhythm, played at relatively slow tempi (about 80 beats per minute).

[13] The graphic similarity between the transcriptions of *aguere* and the timeline of "Banzo 1" that Leite refers to, is evocative of Kofi Agawu's concept of "paper rhythms" (2006: 36–37). These rhythms are typically transferred from oral to written musical traditions for analytical purposes, thus allowing a series of abstract operations that may or may not have resonance with the host cultural mode of expression.

**LL**: I give a lot of importance to the transfer of drum rhythms to melodies respecting the alternation of low- and high-pitched notes in the [*agogô*] bell.[14] In the clave of "Banzo 1" there is a low pitch note that does not exist in the original *aguere*. When you transcribe this clave, you need to clarify that there are two pitch levels in the bell. That low sound has no equivalent in the original *aguere*. There is only one pitch. "Banzo 1" clave is thus more related to the bell pattern of *ijexa*, [which has two notes].

Now, if you hear excerpts where *aguere* appears explicitly, that's different. In those fragments the ensemble is not guided by the piece's main clave, but by *aguere*. That is the result of my arrangement for that piece. This is also clear in my arrangement of [Moacir Santos's][15] "Coisa No 5" (which Leite renamed as "Nanã" in his album *Moacir do Todos os Santos*) where *aguere* is clearly articulated. There you can hear a clave in five [x.xx.x.xx.] and also *aguere* [xx..xxx.][16].

**JDD**: OK. I will eliminate those labels that associate the claves of "Banzo 1" and "Banzo 3" with *aguere* and *kabila*. Thanks so much for the explanation, maestro. Here is the revised table:

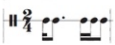
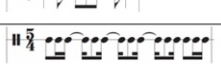
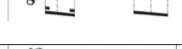
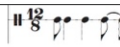
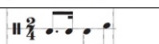
| **Piece in *A saga da travessia* (2016)** | **Timeline** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Banzo Parte 1 | Aguere (expanded) | 5/4 [xx...xx.x.] |  |
| | Hybrid (original) | 2/4 [xx..xxx.] |  |
| Banzo Parte 2 | Vassi (truncated) | 9/8 [x.x.xx.x.] |  |
| Banzo Parte 3 | Hybdid (original) | 5/4 [x.xx.x.x.x.x.x.xx.xx] |  |
| Honra ao Rei | Vassi (rotated) | 12/8 [x.xx.x.x.xx.] |  |
| Professor Luminoso | Ijexá | 4/4 [xx.x.xx.x.x.x.x.] |  |
| | Clave dos mestres | 4/4 [.x.x.x....x.x..x] |  |
| Feira de Sete Portas | Ijexá (truncated) | 7/8 [xx.x.xx.x.x.x.] |  |
| Dasarábias | Vassi (rotated) | 12/8 [xx.x.x.xx.x.] |  |
| Mestre Bimba Visita o Palácio de Ogum | Capoeira | 2/4 [x..xx.x.] |  |
| | Vassi (truncated) | 9/8 [x.x.xx.x.] |  |

**Table 2**. The author's transcriptions of Rumpilezz's timelines in album *A Saga da Travessia* (2016) (version 2).

[14] See Díaz (2021: 86–92) for a discussion of Leite's technique of transferring drum rhythms to the various melodic sections of the big band.
[15] Moacir Santos (1926–2006) was an influential Black Brazilian composer and multi-instrumentalist. In 1965 he released the album *Coisas*, where he fused jazz with various Afro-Brazilian genres. Leite regarded *Coisas* as one of the most influential albums of Brazilian history, as "the Brazilian *Kind of Blue*." In his posthumous album, *Moacir de Todos os Santos* (2022), Leite paid homage to Santos by rearranging *Coisas* for Rumpilezz.
[16] Listen to two fragments of *aguere* [xx..xxx.] in "Nanã" (*Moacir de Todos os Santos*, 2022, track 5, 1:20–1:26 and 5:00–5:06) Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzu9fyjH6nc&list=PLfJndz0utgOMXf5YD_gNkKnmVBDK0JuQ8&index=5

Do you find it more accurate and adjusted to the reality that you have explained to me?

**LL**: You need to revise "Banzo 3" because its clave uses two bell pitches, high and low. You need to differentiate them. [He sings the "Banzo 3" timeline using the syllables "tu" for the low pitch and "ta" for the high note.]

| 1 | | | | 2 | | | | 3 | | | | 4 | | | | 5 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| tu | | ta | ta | | tu | | ta | | ta | | tu | | ta | | ta | tu | | ta | ta |

| tu: low-pitched bell sound |
|---|
| ta: high-pitched bell sound |

**Image 5**. The author's transcription of the timeline of "Banzo 3" using TUBS.

**JDD**: Thanks for clarifying maestro. I will fix that detail. This is how the chart will be published in the book:

**Table 4.1** Continued

| Piece in *A saga da travessia* (2016) | Timeline | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Banzo Parte 1 | Hybrid (original) | [xx . . . xx.x.] | |
| | Aguere | [xx..xxx.] | |
| Banzo Parte 2 | Vassi (truncated) | [x.x.xx.x.] | |
| Banzo Parte 3 | Hybrid (original) | [x.xx.x.x.x.x.x.xx.xx] | |
| Honra ao Rei | Vassi (rotated) | [x.xx.x.x.xx.] | |
| Professor Luminoso | Ijexá | [xx.x.xx.x.x.x.x.] | |
| | Clave dos mestres | [.x.x.x....x.x..x] | |
| Feira de Sete Portas | Ijexá (truncated) | [xx.x.xx.x.x.x.] | |
| Dasarábias | Vassi (rotated) | [xx.x.x.xx.x.] | |
| Mestre Bimba Visita o Palácio de Ogum | Capoeira | [x..xx.x.] | |
| | Vassi (truncated) | [x.x.xx.x.] | |

(*) Implied timeline

**Table 3**. The author's transcriptions of Rumpilezz's timelines in album *A Saga da Travessia* (2016) (version 3). This is the published version (see Díaz 2021: 94–95).

## Concluding Thoughts

How many times do we wish our interlocutors could read what we write about them and give us feedback? This is rarely possible because they may not be literate in the researcher's publishing language, or even when they are, academic language is often too dry, jargony, and unappealing to them. As we have seen, however, musical transcriptions can function as a bridge, a shared language between researchers and insiders when musicians are literate in the notational system used by the researcher. I was fortunate that Leite, along with the composers and directors of other two orchestras discussed in my book (Dainho Xequerê and Bira Marques) shared with me a common notational system, staff notation.[17] Unsurprisingly, all of them engaged in lively conversation when I shared my transcriptions. Leite's reactions to my transcriptions underscore the need to (re)center sonic materials as a primary subject of analysis alongside social theory. Such an approach deepens our engagement with the musical materials we study and enables ethnomusicologists to contribute not only to document traditions but also to their ongoing development as understood by practitioners themselves. Yet because staff notation is embedded in Euro-American colonial epistemologies, its use risks reproducing forms of misrepresentation and other kinds of authorial biases. For instance, the system's assumption of isochronous beat subdivision obscures the discussion of swing feel, a fundamental aspect of groove musics globally and central to Leite's approach to rhythm (see Díaz 2014: 208–214). It is therefore unsurprising that swing feel did not emerge in our exchange: staff notation cannot accurately capture it and thus cannot prompt meaningful conversations about it. Similar limitations arise when discussing *maqāmāt* or any pitch system outside twelve-tone equal temperament (12 TET). The meanings that emerge from dialogues mediated by transcriptions with staff notation are inevitable filtered through conceptualizations of rhythm, melody, and harmony rooted in Western music theory.

One solution is to employ alternative notational systems that more accurately reflect how musicians theorize their own musics. Many locally developed systems can serve as effective bridges. *Solkattu* or *sargam*, for example, are well suited for conversations about rhythm and melody in Carnatic music, and *gongchepu* or *jianpu* can facilitate dialogues about Chinese traditional music. An example closer to the cultural context discussed in this article is a syllabic method used by capoeira practitioners, both in Brazil and internationally, which employs onomatopoeic syllables such as "din," "don," and "chi" to represent *berimbau* sounds (see Díaz 2007). Yet the global prominence of Western classical music has also spurred the development of hybrid notations. One notable example is *jianpu* combined with staff notation, developed in early twentieth-century China, which eventually supplanted *gongchepu* as the primary method for notating traditional Chinese music (Chang 2022, Sparks 2023). Comparable processes where local notational systems adapt under the influence of staff notation have been documented in *shakuhachi* music (Denyer 1993, Iwamoto 1995), Korean traditional music (Lee 2000),

[17] Letieres Leite, Bira Marques, and Dainho Xequerê, the respective directors of Rumpilezz, Orquestra Afrosinfônica, and Orquestra de Berimbaus Dainho Xequerê, used staff notation to score and rehearse their repertoires.

and various plucked chordophone traditions that use tablature (Stearns 1978, Page 2013). Whether or not these systems arose or were adapted through engagement with a hegemonic notational system such as staff notation, the key point remains: researchers should engage musicians with notational systems that are already familiar and meaningful to them.

Because dialogic transcription relies on musical literacy, there are many cases where its implementation is impossible or seriously limited. First, the anthropological turn in ethnomusicology has brought many scholars into the field without formal training in staff notation or any alternative system. Likewise, many musicians operate entirely within oral traditions and use no form of notation. This was precisely the case for the Nzinga Berimbau Orchestra (the fourth case study in my book), whose members create, rehearse, and perform without the aid of notation. I therefore could not use transcription as a bridge for discussing my interpretations of their compositions. I could, however, have used the syllabic system mentioned above, or taught them a simplified box-notation method to spark conversations about their *berimbau* rhythms. Another possibility would have been to transform my transcriptions into animated graphic scores such as those created by Stephen Malinowski and view them together.[18] Alternatively, following Ciantar, I could have used hand gestures as embodied representations of the transcriptions or sketched diagrams of their pieces' formal structures. When interlocutors are unfamiliar with any notational system, researchers must adopt more creative approaches to make transcription a productive dialogic tool.

Finally, conversations mediated through transcription may reveal divergent interpretations between researchers and musicians. Although this is one of the most generative aspects of the approach, it is also possible that the researcher's interpretation—such as my analysis of the transformation of the *aguere* timeline into what Leite called "hybrid claves"—is also accurate. How, then, do we document such cases ethically? The solution is transparency. In *Africanness in Action*, I present both interpretations (Leite's and my own) while foregrounding his (Díaz 2021: 96–97). This allows re aders to see that Leite's claim of originality does not need to preclude structural connections to African diasporic tradition. Such disagreements can enrich analysis without marginalizing musicians' perspectives or casting them as less valid.

In conclusion, using transcription as a collaborative and dialogic tool does not require reliance of staff notation as a universal "lingua franca." Rather, it demands the implementation of notational systems that are germane to the musicians we work with or of alternative graphic or gestural techniques when musicians and/or researchers are unfamiliar with any form of notation. When we represent music graphically in a way that is legible to our interlocutors in the field, transcriptions can become a gateway into deep conversations about musical structure, musical meaning, and more. Shared transcriptions can illuminate some of the ethnomusicologists' blind spots.

[18] Stephen Malinowski is a US composer, pianist, educator, and software engineer known for his musical animations and his computer program, the Music Animation Machine, which produces animated graphical scores. Many of his scores can be watched on YouTube and are available on his website https://www.patreon.com/musanim.

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