

The Afro-Cuban music: origins and etymologirs

Dr. William W. Megenney
Professor. University of California. Riverside

Much has been written about Afro-Cuban music: “*La música en Cuba*” by Alejo Carpentier (1946), the study “*La africanía en la música folklórica de Cuba*” by Fernando Ortiz (1950), and the multiple studies by Jorge and Isabel Castellanos, among them “*El negro en la música cubana*”, chapter 5, volume 4 of the *Cultura afrocubana* collection. I endeavor to make a modest contribution to these studies with this small article in which I include what I consider to be new data about the conformation of the music of Afro-Cuban origin in Cuba, an etymological commentary of terms relative to it and a brief comparison with a similar phenomenon which has taken place in Brazil.

In the first volume of Castellanos and Castellanos, the authors divide the history of the Afro-Negroid influences in Cuba in four sections: 1) “African roots of the Negroes in Cuba”, 2) “the Negro in pre-plantation Cuba”, 3) “the Negro in Cuba in the plantation period”, and 4) “abolitionism, 1800-1844”.

As we all know, the slave trade in the Americas started in the area of the Caribbean when the first colonists needed manual labor settling the first colonies and in the first attempts at agriculture and com-

merce. When they realized that the native population were not apt for these activities, they started to bring slaves from the western coast of Africa, who belonged to the Sudanic subfamily, which is found from Senegal to the border between Nigeria and Cameroon, and from the Bantu subfamily, which is found from Cameroon to the border between Angola and Namibia¹. Besides the explanations given in Castellanos and² about this first period, Olavo Alén Rodríguez, in his contribution to the work *The Garland Handbook of Latin American Music*, divides the African musical legacies in two sections: 1) the Yoruba heritage and the *santería* religion, and 2) the Bantu heritage and the Congolese secret societies, thus showing the natural division which arose between these two sub-Saharan families in the Americas, a division also present in other Latin American countries such as Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

The African traditions started to take root in Cuba in the 16th Century with the arrival of blacks of the Sudanic family, as the Portuguese, who controlled the largest part of the trade at that time, started bringing them from that part of the African coast. Later on, during the 17th and 18th centuries, many slaves from the Bantu nations

arrived in the Caribbean and established their customs. In the 19th Century, there was another great influx of Sudanese, especially Yoruba, ewe/fon and efik, who were identified in Cuba respectively as *lucumí*, *arará* and *carabalí* or Calabaran (or *abakuá*, *ñāñigo* and *brícamos*).³

In Castellanos and Castellanos⁴ we read: “The black slaves were taken away from Africa almost naked”, that is to say, they could not bring anything from their native lands, except their memories and their oral and musical traditions. They preserved these traditions in the new world, especially their music. Castellanos and Castellanos⁵ add: “...Africans managed to preserve many of their traditions in their new residence. In this respect they were helped by the common

‘life style’... and also by another characteristic of the pre-colonial African society, its outstanding conservatism, their intense attachment to their own customs.” This has already been observed in the case of Brazil. French researcher Pierre Verger⁶ studied the similarities between the music, the dance and the musical instruments of Bahia, Brazil and those of what is today Nigeria, Togo and Benin. The similarities are obvious and prove that the conservatism mentioned by these two authors allowed the creation of a faithful reproduction of what had been the conglomerate of these slaves’ customs in their native Africa. The same happened in Cuba, since the Africans brought to the Caribbean as well as Brazil came from the same nations.



The phases that the black slave, according to Castellanos and Castellanos⁷, experienced in Cuba as part of his acculturation on American lands were three: “1) compulsory learning of his master’s culture, substituting part of his own with it; 2) acquisition of elements of other African cultures through his close daily interaction with slaves from regions of Africa different from his own, and 3) transfer of his collective cultural estate to his masters’ culture.” Today’s Afro-Cuban music represents, therefore, the outcome of these three phases. However, even today, the flavor, the rhythms, the instruments and the lyrics are a testimony to what they must have been in Africa at the time of slavery. It is the third phase that most concerns us for this study, since it explains the perseverance and the condition of “slave over master” in the introduction of African cultural aspects to a rather European environment transplanted to the New World. This facet of the Cuban history also helps us to understand the preservation of African traditions, among them the musical ones. According to historians, the masters of slaves in Cuba were relatively lenient with respect to the conservation of some African traditions.

Interestingly, these African slaves, not having the same materials they used in Africa to make their musical instruments, adopted the materials that were around them in the Caribbean. Sometimes it is difficult to know with certainty what

these instruments were like in Africa, since we do not have access to drawings, as the traders, obviously, had no interest in preserving the customs and traditions of their captives. However, in the African continent there are still instruments which are quite similar to those we find in the Americas. For example, in Cuba, there is a set of *congos* of Bantu tradition, called *yuka*, which had a great impact on Cuban culture. This set is made up of three drums: a large one (the *caja*), a medium one (the *mula*) and a small one (the *cachimbo*). These drums evidently had their origin in the *ngoma* set.⁸ The *ngoma* drums are made from wooden staves in the shape of a barrel and they have only one head. With respect to the etymologies of these words, *yuka* undoubtedly derives from the kikongo *yúka*, “beat, hammer, hit with a stick”; *caja* must come from the Spanish *caja*, since the muffled, fricative, velar sound does not exist in most Bantu languages (this could be a translation of an original Bantu word); *cachimbo*, unlike what it means here, is “smoking pipe” in kimbundu, kasimbu and in manganja, kasimbo. It could arise from this word because of its small size and/or because its shape in some way resembles a smoking pipe. In Brazil there is also a set of three drums, a large one, a medium one and a small one. These drums in Brazil are of fon origin¹⁰, of the kwa group of the Sudanic family, and not from Bantu. Interestingly, this is an example of cultural similarities in the area of the music between the Sudanic and Bantu tribes and the placement of each group (musical ensemble) in Latin America.

As Castellanos and Castellanos¹¹ reminds us, “It would be impossible today completely to unravel the complex historic tangle of the Afro-Cuban musical origins”. However, we can find some relatively credible evidences about these origins when



comparing what is found today in Africa with what there is in other parts of America. Religious and secular music have been confused through the centuries and this to a certain extent reflects what the musical situation had been in the African continent. That is why today we find in Afro-Cuban music so many references to the Yoruba orishas, those spirits which provide us the daily *aché* which sustains soul and body, in Celia Cruz's songs, for example. "In Afro-Cuban culture, worship and recreation are far from being contradictory terms".¹²

Afro-Cuban music retains many characteristics of African origin, for example, the antiphonal chant. Among the many studies carried out about the different aspects of the African influences in Cuba, we can refer to the recently published one by Fuentes Guerra and Schwegler¹³, where we find a detailed exam of the language and rites of Palo Monte Mayombe, including descriptions of its African sources and gods. Here, as it is so common through these Afro-Negroid cultures in our Americas, the annotations of the daily events are included as an integral part of the song, a process which has been termed "editorial comment". It is what we find in Brazil with the name *quizumbas*, which are chorus songs led by the solist. Although much of the lyrics of these songs are sung in Spanish or in Portuguese, as the case may be, there also are lyrics in different versions of the Creole languages, such as a Negro immigrant Spanish (of the ancient slaves) which contains many linguistic elements of the African languages, mainly from the lexical level.

Just as the lyrics of the songs, many of the musical instruments are called by what are supposed to be their original African names. We would like to explore some of

these to see whether they derive from the Sudanic or the Bantu family and, if it were possible, isolate the "nation" or the exact language of its roots. A very popular percussion instrument is what is today called the *reja de arado* (plow grill), that is, the metallic *ekón*, which is played with a small stick using several different rhythms according to the occasion. This is the first cousin of the Brazilian *agôgô*, which has two small bells and that of the Brazilian *gã*, which has a single small bell, as well as the Cuban instrument. Having searched in the available sources of African languages, I could only locate, in efik (nation from where many were taken to Cuba), *ekōñ* [ek] "war, strife". Perhaps the reference here may be to a war weapon with this cylindric shape or to some percussion instrument used in the wars (such as the drums) to inspire the troops.

The *erikunde* or *chachás*, which are small basket rattles, very similar to the Brazilian *caxixi*, which are shaken so the seeds they have inside rattle, are also popular in Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies. The origin of this word has proved to be rather elusive. However, we can suggest the morphologic combination of the kikongo *éedi*¹⁴, a demonstrative adjective plus kikongo *kundi* "fruit". The shape of the *erikunde* could suggest the shape of a fruit, or perhaps the idea of a fruit, since it has seeds inside. The word *chachá* derives from the kimbundu, *cjacija* "make noise while one dances with jingles on the ankles". Here the reference is obviously to the sound that the *erikunde* make when shaken. The kimbundu word is also the source of the name of the dance *chachachá*, which originated in Cuba.

Another of the instruments somewhat similar to the *erikunde* for its way of sounding is the *chekeré* or *güiro*. The word *güiro* derives from the Arawak (family of native

languages of the Caribbean) *gwira* “gourd tree and its fruit”. The word *chekeré* derives from the Yoruba *sékéré* “percussion instrument made from a hollowed gourd with strips of little *cauri* [mollusk] shells on the surface, which make a scratchy sound when it is played”. There also exists in fon tsékélé with the same meaning.

With respect to the different drums, besides the famous *congas*, which word derives from the old region of the African Congo (term which comes from the manicongo, who inhabited parts of the territory which is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola), exist the *bokú* drum, large, long and rather narrow; the *batá*, *lucumí* (Yoruba) liturgical drum, narrower toward the bottom than toward the top, and the *ekue*, a uni-membrano-phonous tripod. Castellanos and Castellanos¹⁵ say about the *bokú*: “...it is an eastern Creole drum..., long and narrow, and with a box made from staves, which hangs bandoleer-style from the shoulder of the musician or *bokusero*, who plays it with both hands”. The word *bokú* could derive from the Yoruba *Bóku*, “name of an orisha who lives in the kapok tree”. Another similar word could not be found in the sources consulted.¹⁶

The word *batá* derives from the Yoruba *bàtá* “drum used by the participants of the *Shango*¹⁷ cult and that of the *egungun*, that is ‘the bones’, with reference to the dead ancestors”.¹⁸ The word *batá* is also found in Brazil and in the Creole English dialect Gullah of the United States (Georgia and South Carolina). In Gullah it appears as a personal name and in Brazil as “*tambor de madeira, a tiracolo, de duas faces, que era usado pelos nagôs nas cerimônias públicas.*”¹⁹

The word *ekue* means “liar” in anagó²⁰, but there is also *ekueti* “trunk, coffer”, which proves more logical from a semantic point of

view for the similarity between “trunk” and “drum”. Interestingly, in Brazil exist *ecú* “*dança dos mortos; nome da vestimenta de egum*” and *ecuaxé*: “*cantiga de recepção à chegada das divindades em transe*” of Yoruba origin. Not to reject a possibility of source from the kikongo, we give the _expression *nkweke-nkweke* “sound of clicking of rings, noise of saw”. There is always the possibility here of having formed a combination of two or more sources, since the slaves were mingled in the plantations, there were representatives of the Sudanic and the Bantu nations in the same plantation or pro-slavery *entrepôt* because the owners wanted to avoid insurrections.²¹

The *ekue* drum has other names, to wit, *bongó*, *tanse*, *akanirán*, *iyá kondondó* and *munanga*. The *ekue* is played with a long rod which is called *yín* in Cuba. In Venezuela there is a very popular drum of African origin, the *furruco*, which is played in the same manner, with a long rod rotated between the hands. Regarding the other names in Cuba for the *ekue*, we can see that the *bongó*, an almost generic name for some, could derive from the sango (Tanzania): “wooden drum, any drum used to give orders” and/or from the bulu (Cameroon): “type of thorny-bark tree the wood of which is used to make drums”. According to Alvarez Nazario²², *bongó* derives from the injolo [?] *bongóo* “small drum used to dance”. The word *tanse* may be from the kikongo *tanzi* “basket” (for its shape); *akanirán* may perhaps come from the efik: “instrument of two sections made of iron or bronze played with a small stick” (*agôgô* in Brazil; semantic confusion here?); *iyá kondondó* could be a combination of the Yoruba *iyá* “mother” and the mandingo (Senegambia and Mali) *konondo* “nine” (reference?) or from the kikongo *nkóndo* (with reduplication of the last syllable), “name of

a tree”; *munanga* would come from the kikongo *munànnga* “chief, dignitary, honorable person”, since the drums of the Afro-Cuban orders (religious cults) have their own personalities and their own souls.

There are many other instruments used in the Afro-Cuban cults, some of which, with or without modifications, have been transferred to Cuban popular music. There is also a whole series of musical instruments used for the *tumba francesa* in Eastern Cuba. That name derives from the Haitian exiles who arrived in the East of the island of Cuba flee-

ing from the violence of the revolution that took place in the latter part of the 18th Century and early part of the 19th Century. This music is of Sudanic origin, from Benin (formerly Dahomey), with mixtures of other elements present in the colonial period (e.g., Spanish, French music).

So many musical facets deserve more detailed studies, which will surely in a not too distant future be carried out with the help of equipment and suitably trained researchers.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. For a good study of the classification of the sub-Saharan languages, see George P. Murdock, 1959.

2. Castellanos, Jorge & Castellanos, Isabel. *Cultura afrocubana*. 1. “El negro en Cuba, 1492-1844”. Ediciones Universal. Miami, 1988.

3. The so-called *carabalí* are of ibibio origin, who came from the region of Calabar in Southeast Nigeria. From Calabar to *carabalí* there was a metathesis between “l” and “r”.

4. Castellanos, Jorge: qu.wk., page 45

5. Castellanos, Jorge. qu.wk., page 56

6. Verger, Pierre. *Dieux d'Afrique/ culte des orishas et vodouns à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves en Afrique et à Bahia, la Baie de tous les Saints au Brésil*. Paul Hartmann. Paris, 1954.

7. Castellanos, Jorge. Qu.wk., pages 56 & 57

8. The word *ngoma* derives from the kikongo *ngòma* “drum”.

9. Laman, Karl Eduard. *Dictionnaire kikongo-français*. Librairie Falk fils. Bruselas, 1936. page 1144

10. Pessoa de Castro, Yeda. *Falares africanos na Bahia*. Academia Brasileira de Letras. Rio de Janeiro, 2001. page 1144; Megenney, William. *Cuba y Brasil: etnohistoria del empleo religioso del lenguaje afroamericano*. Ediciones Universal. Miami, 1999.

11. Castellanos, Jorge & Castellanos, Isabel. *Cultura afrocubana*. 4. “Letras, música, arte”. Editorial Presencia, Ltda. Bogotá, 1994. page 268

12. Castellanos, Jorge & Castellanos, Isabel. *Cultura afrocubana*. 4. “Letras, música, arte”. Editorial Presencia, Ltda. Bogotá, 1994. page 271

13. Fuentes Guerra, Jesús & Armin Schwegler. *Lengua y ritos del Palo Monte Mayombe (Dioses cubanos y sus fuentes africanas)*. Vervuert Iberoamericana. Madrid, 2005.

14. As is known, the [d] easily turns into [r], since both sounds are phonetically similar.

15. Castellanos, Jorge & Castellanos, Isabel. *Cultura afrocubana*. 4. “Letras, música, arte”. Editorial Presencia, Ltda. Bogotá, 1994. page 287

16. Cabrera, Lydia. *Anagó, vocabulario lucumi*. Cabrera y Rojas. Miami, 1970. page 83

17. *Shangó* is the orisha of lightning and thunder; it is Saint Jerónimo in the Catholic tradition.

18. The word *egungun* means “bones” in Yoruba.

19. Pessoa de Castro. qu. wk., page 171

20. Cabrera Lydia: qu. wk. page 107

21. The masters thought that if there was linguistic communication among the slaves, there would then be less possibility of rebellion and conspiracy among them.

22. Alvarez Nazario, Manuel. *El elemento afronegroide en el español de Puerto Rico*. Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. San Juan, 1974. page 287