

*Arará* and Afro-Cuban Music: The Heartbeat of Black Atlantic History  
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Music – like its sister performance arts dance and theatre – is experienced as an art of the moment. We experience the songs we listen to in a series of moments as fleeting and metered as our pulse, our heartbeat.

The songs we listen to, no matter what style of music, are composed of the formal elements of music: rhythm, harmony, melody, and counterpoint. When we listen to Afro-Cuban music, does it ever occur to us that the formal terminology that we use to describe the structure and composition of Western music is applicable to Afro-Cuban music? And that there is a history of form to this music? When listening to this music, as we feel its pulse, do we at least sense the historical trajectory of this music?

To begin with, this is a music that was banned – yes, prohibited by law. And at various times, government attempted to control or marginalize this music. The use of *batá*, for example, was censored on radio in Cuba. The music of the *cabildos*, *Arará*, was banned from the airwaves, and then later given proscribed exposure and marginalization.

Doesn't this sound like the history of Black American music? Yet, from the very beginning, Cuban classical, folkloric and popular music freely mined the ores and bedrock of Afro-Cuban music and processed them into “acceptability,” just as Elvis Presley “homogenized” or “pasteurized” the music of the “down home blues” of the American Blacks. This is the same as selling refined white sugar to the countries that grow sugar cane or aluminum products to countries that mine bauxite.

This music arrived in Cuba with the first importation of slaves in the 16th century. The slaves who were abducted to Cuba came mainly from what was called the “Slave Coast.” It was the habit of the Europeans to name the parts of Africa they visited by the commodities they took from that region. Grain (from dry rice farming that was imported to the U.S. Carolinas) came mostly from the Grain Coast: Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. Large quantities of Ivory gave the Ivory Coast its name. Ghana, called El Mina by the Portuguese, was known as the Gold Coast. Cameroon was so named because of the rich beds of shrimp at the place called Rio Cameroes. Togo, Dahomey (now Benin), Nigeria, Rio Muni, Gabon, Congo and Angola were called the Slave Coast. Of course, it is important to note that large quantities of slaves arrived from all of these regions regardless of the nomenclature. This mix of ethnicities found its way to Cuba as it did to all of the other slave-labor economies that contributed to the wealth of the Americas.

In the midst of oppression and cultural repression, the slaves managed to create enclaves of cultural continuity. These were religious/social organizations called *cabildos* or *confrados*. One of the earliest of these of historical record is *Arará* Migano formed by the Migano clan of Dahomey. *Arará* is most likely of 18th century origin. But like most

of the African fraternities it did not have an uninterrupted continuity. But by the 1880's Arará Migano and other *cabildos* were revived under new laws that attempted to proscribe their activities. In 1890, Migano was revived, suppressed for two years, only to reemerge.

Although the *cabildos* originally attempted to confine membership strictly on a tribal basis, the checkered and fractious history of Cuba contributed to the interaction of various tribes and clans and – of course – Catholicism. Under these conditions, *Kongo*, *Yoruba* and other elements began to emerge within what was once an exclusive *cabildo* or *confrado*. As a result some *cabildos* are named variously after ethnic groups, clans, Catholic saints, African deities and even the names of drums, ceremonies or African port of embarkation to the New World: *Cabildo del Rey*, *Lukumi*, *Santeria*, *Pataki*, *Nanigo* to name but a few. Nonetheless, we can easily identify the Arará (old Dahomey) *Vodun* deities with *Nago/Yoruba* (southwest Nigeria) counterparts: *Afra* is *Elegba (Elegua)*; *Ogun Baleio* is *Ogun* and *Akeito* is *Ochosi*.

By the 1920s, this music, that had been forbidden, marginalized and banned from radio, began to make inroads into popular culture. So-called “polite” Cuban music began to mine the music of the *cabildos* in the same fashion that Bartok, Chopin, Dvorak, Mozart and other composers of classical music had mined the folk traditions of Europe. One of the outstanding examples of this is the advent of the *son* from Oriente.

*Arará* had its stronghold in the Matanzas province, but with the advent of the *son*, key innovators in a new Cuban music (such as the great Arsenio Rodriguez) were free to mix these traditions. Meanwhile, the close fraternity of jazz, Cuban and Negro (as they were called in those days) musicians from the United States began playing together and creating new sounds. Latin Jazz, Charanga, Pachanga, Salsa, and Boogaloo – these all have their roots in the *cabildos*.

Albert Murray says that the difference between Black American sacred and secular music is the lyrics. Did this happen in Cuba? When you listen to *Arará*, perhaps you will begin to isolate certain forms and connect them to the history of Black Atlantic music. If you are interested in pursuing this idea, I suggest you take a look at George Brandon, *Santeria from Africa to the New World*; George Eaton Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World*; and Philip Sweeney's *Rough Guide to Cuban Music*.

*Arará* is a significant contribution to Black Atlantic culture and the world. But like so many contributions to world arts, it may face extinction and exist only in the forms that it influenced. What irony! Whether you speak Dutch, English, French, Portuguese or Spanish, you are speaking in the tongue of your colonizing Father. But your Mother spoke African. It is only an accident that you were born into one of these European languages and not another: what if the caravel had arrived a day earlier at El Mina or was delayed by the overland shipment coming to Kisama?

Your ancestors would have landed at a different port in the New World.