

Musical Pilgrimages to Cuba: Negotiating Tourism and Musical Learning in Cuban Batá Drumming

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine aspects of intercultural music learning and teaching using the case studies of foreigners travelling to Cuba who learn and perform ceremonial batá drumming. Through ethnography and an analysis of the Cuban tourist industry, I situate the particular experiences of my participants in the broader context of the Cuban tourist industry. I focus on the experiences of my participants as they develop networks of musical learning and become involved in ceremonial batá performance, highlighting how they have the potential to create lasting relationships that are of benefit to all parties involved.

Résumé : Cet article s'efforce d'examiner certains aspects de l'apprentissage et de l'enseignement interculturels de la musique au moyen d'études de cas d'étrangers se rendant à Cuba pour y apprendre à jouer du batá, un tambour cérémoniel. Par une étude ethnographique et une analyse de l'industrie touristique cubaine, je situe les expériences particulières des participants dans le contexte plus large de l'industrie touristique cubaine. Je me concentre sur les expériences des participants à mon étude tandis qu'ils construisent des réseaux d'apprentissage musical et s'impliquent dans des performances cérémonielles de batá, soulignant le fait qu'ils ont le potentiel de créer des relations durables pouvant être bénéfiques pour toutes les parties concernées.

In ethnomusicology, questions that address learning the music of another culture have tended to focus on the development of bi-musicality as a fieldwork method (e.g., Baily 2008; Hood 1960; Witzleben 2010), or musical learning as a component of university-level music programs (e.g., Solís 2004). Significantly less has been written about the experiences of those who travel to develop intercultural musical skills and who also function outside of the academic model. But for a small cohort of professional and amateur musicians, travel and musical learning have played an important role in developing musical skills, as well as developing a cultural understanding

and empathy for the “other.” Often those seeking musical knowledge come from affluent countries, particularly in the West, and travel to regions in the developing world such as Africa, India, and Latin America.

The following paper explores issues related to this type of intercultural music learning using the specific case study of foreigners who learn and perform ceremonial batá drumming in Cuba. Through ethnographic analysis, I intend to examine how musical learning is enacted in locations where concepts of informal learning amid cultural participation come to play a prominent role in the learning process. I also draw into the analysis the role that the Cuban tourism industry has played in establishing a network of foreign students and Cuban batá teachers. I will explore the kinds of relationships that exist between Cubans and foreigners who seek to fully participate in ceremonial batá performance, with a focus on the perspective of the foreign student.

While this article will specifically address the issue of travelling to another country in order to learn music, the issues I raise could also be applied to learning the music of another culture within one’s own country. I focus on international travel in order to articulate the ways that tourism and musical learning have helped to shape new pedagogical practices and intercultural awareness while influencing the quality of the interactions that occur. The example of Cuba is particularly relevant in drawing out some of the ways that state-sponsored tourism may shape various forms of engagement with musical culture.

My interest in this area has come about because of my own involvement with ceremonial batá drumming. I initially travelled to Cuba in 2005 to learn Cuban percussion. While I had heard of batá drums, I had not been exposed to their music. My primary focus was on more popular percussion instruments, namely the congas, or *tumbadora*, and *timbales*. While at my first conga teacher’s home in Cuba, I noticed the three hourglass-shaped batá drums sitting beside the other percussion. As he explained to me a little bit about their history, I became fascinated. The batá are played for ceremonies of the Afro-Cuban religion known as *santería*, ceremonies at which the community comes to dance, sing, and—more importantly to me—drum. Religious drumming? I had never heard of anything like this in Australia. I decided then and there that this was something in which I wanted take to part.

Returning to Cuba four times since that first visit, I have not only developed some proficiency in batá performance, but I have also been given the opportunity to perform in these ceremonies that I first heard about all those years ago. In many ways I have become a cultural insider, having gained access to opportunities that were once reserved only for Cubans. But in other ways, this experience has been mediated by my continuing status as a tourist,

someone who travels to Cuba to learn and perform batá drums, but who ultimately returns home.

Research into music tourism has often focused on the act of travelling to other places in order to be part of a musical event or to see famous musical sites (Cohen and Roberts 2013; Gibson and Connell 2005). The literature recognizes the “growing significance of culture in the construction of tourism” (Gibson and Connell 2005: 1), and the prominent role that music plays in this process. Recently, more research has examined how tourism and musical learning interact (Carter 2013; Flaig 2010). This has led Flaig to conclude that tourism and pedagogy “are not mutually exclusive, but [are] in fact deeply intertwined” (Flaig 2010: 145). But this research has so far focused on formal networks of musical learning established in the host country. By formal, I refer to networks and organizational structures that have been established with the specific aim of teaching music to foreigners. This article, however, deals with *informal* networks, those that are most often established through a mixture of personal contacts, introductions, and happenstance.

My own experiences travelling to Cuba to learn batá drumming are indicative of the various ways that tourists may engage with different cultures. Too often tourism is viewed as a superficial activity, undertaken by those who to have the money and time to engage in travel for the purposes of relaxation or diversion (Cohen 1979). Here I would like to draw on Erik Cohen’s models of tourist experience to highlight other, more profound levels of experience that tourists may seek out. Cohen’s categories of tourist experience include the notion of travel for relaxation and diversion, but also take into account those who search for deeper meaning in their experience, what he refers to as the experiential and existential modes of engagement (1979: 186; 189). Both of these modes of tourism revolve around a search for meaning not found in the tourist’s own culture. But while experiential tourists remain aware of their “otherness,” existential tourists choose to embrace the different culture as their own, and begin to incorporate it into their own identity, drawing on it for meaning and authenticity in their own lives.

Cohen also draws out a number of similarities between secular tourism and religious pilgrimage (see also Gammon 2004; Griffith 2013). Bohlman describes pilgrimage as a “journey from the daily life of an individual . . . to a sacred world” (1996: 386), often resulting in “inward and outward transformations” (Griffith 2013: 3). Religious connotations also appear in descriptions of travel to secular sites of significance, such as those with musical importance, that induce “an extreme intensity of experience” (Gibson and Connell 2005: 171). This convergence of a religious and secular meaning has given the notion of pilgrimage a prominent position in the discourse of tourism.

Musical pilgrimage may not necessarily relate to a religious search, but may imply a search for broader meaning and authenticity of experience, as is the case in secular pilgrimages. Foreign batá drummers performing in ceremonies in Cuba is not always indicative of religious commitment, and can also be viewed as a purely musical experience. But, owing to the nature of the religious environment, experiences are often qualified through the values of the religious community itself. Ideals of community, commitment, perseverance, and faith are all seen as markers of a religious life in *santería*, and as such form a basis for the development of religious, and musical, competence.

Aside from questions of religious and secular experience, tourism as both a condition and an industry plays a significant role in the experience of the musical pilgrim. This is particularly visible in the context of tourism and Cuba, where the development of an international tourist industry has brought massive changes to the social and economic conditions of this country. I do not intend to provide an exhaustive analysis of the complexities that are at play, but instead offer a broad overview of some of the experiences that help give shape to the nature of learning and performing in this context, and to examine these experiences against the wider backdrop of the tourism industry in Cuba.

Developing a Cuban Tourist Industry

Foreigners are constantly reminded of their status as “special” people in Cuba, a status that revolves around their ability to inject much needed hard currency into the volatile Cuban economy. Before the 1990s, when the USSR heavily subsidized the Cuban economy, the Cuban tourist industry remained underdeveloped and was not considered important by the Cuban government (Moore 2006: 229). During the 1990s, after the breakdown of the USSR, Cuba underwent severe shortages of all essential goods, including food, medicines, and fuel. This time is known as the *período especial* (special period). One way that the government sought to bolster the Cuban economy was by opening its doors to tourism. Before the 1990s, Cuba’s socialist government had viewed international tourism suspiciously, perceiving that interactions between Cubans and foreign tourists could lead to a degenerative effect on Cuba’s socialist ideals (Padilla and McElroy 2007: 650). Qualifying the government’s new stance on tourism, Fidel Castro went so far as to state that, “We do not like tourism. It has become an economic necessity” (qtd. in Taylor and McGlynn 2009: 406).

Today, the legacy of the *período especial* still resonates as a lived reality for most Cubans, noticeably in the economic struggles they

face daily. This struggle, known colloquially as *la lucha* (the struggle), speaks of the widespread difficulties faced by Cubans each day: lack of money, shortages of food and necessary household goods, transportation problems, and crumbling infrastructure. For many Cubans, tourism has become one of the few genuine opportunities for economic advancement, as both formal and informal economies spring up to service this sector.

This unique situation has prompted a broad scholarly exploration of tourism in Cuba. Studies have investigated the challenges that Cuba's rapid adoption of a tourist economy have caused, including the inherent difficulties of instituting capitalist tourist models in a socialist state (Scarpaci 1998; Taylor and McGlynn 2009), the emergence of Cuba as a sex tourist destination (Cabezas 2009; Davidson 1996), and an exploration of some of the social consequences wrought through the tourist industry (Bodenheimer 2013; Roland 2013). Most of these studies emphasize the ways in which tourism has negatively affected the social structure of Cuba, where ideologies of socialist egalitarianism have been uncomfortably positioned beside pragmatic necessity. Another important area of research, and the one most relevant to this article, has been an examination of the growing importance of religious tourism in Cuba, especially tourism connected to the Afro-Cuban religion of *santería* (Delgado 2014; Hagedorn 2001).

Santería is an Afro-Cuban religion derived mainly from the spiritual beliefs of Yoruban slaves, and has become a prominent element in the Cuban tourism industry. Its growth in the USA and some Latin American countries has been well documented (Juárez 2009; Saldivar 2011; Vega 1995), suggesting *santería* is a global religion. Being a religion that lacks a centralized institutional authority, many of these international centres of worship retain a large degree of autonomy. But for many non-Cuban practitioners, Cuba remains the source of "authentic culture and spiritual authority" (Delgado 2014: 150). Owing to this perception, Cuba receives a steady stream of foreign practitioners who come to the island to undergo initiations, receive spiritual powers, and partake in religious instruction.

Ceremonial Batá Drumming

Ceremonial Cuban batá drumming forms one part of the ritual complex of *santería*. The batá drums are used in important ceremonies of *santería* known either as *toques* or *tambores*. *Toques* are communal events, where *santería* practitioners gather to celebrate and praise the *orisha*, the spirits

that form the focus of worship. Music, and in particular batá drumming, play an integral role in these ceremonies. The drumming, combined with call-and-response song form, are used to praise and communicate with the orisha, with the intent of inducing possession in one or more of the participants. Toques are divided into distinct sections that correspond to ceremonial purpose. The *oru seco*, or *oru igbodú*, is performed solo by the batá drums, which play through a sequence of “salutes” dedicated to specific orisha. The remaining sections add a lead singer, or *akpon*, to the musical ensemble, who leads the participants in songs that are dedicated to specific orisha.

Three batá drums make up the batá ensemble. All possess a similar hourglass form, but differ in size. From the smallest to the largest they are called the *okónkolo*, the *itótele*, and the *iyá*.¹ Batá drums used in ceremonies are also generally consecrated and contain attributes of the orisha known as *aña*. These batá are known as *batá fundamento*, which distinguish them from batá that do not contain *aña*, known as *batá aberikula*. Because of the sacred nature of the drums, ceremonial batá drummers who play batá fundamento must first undergo a process of initiation and are consequently known as *omo aña*, or children of *aña*. It should be noted that in Cuba, *omo aña* must be heterosexual men. Women and homosexuals are prohibited from performing on batá fundamento, although there are no restrictions placed on performance of batá aberikula.²

There is a small but dedicated cohort of non-Cuban *omo aña* who travel to Cuba to learn and perform ceremonial batá drumming.³ My research is informed by my own experiences learning and performing ceremonial batá drumming, as well as interview data obtained from three consultants who have had similar experiences. These three people, Adrian Hearn, Dominic Kirk, and Antoine Miniconi, are also non-Cuban *omo aña*. Hearn and Kirk both reside in Australia, and I was introduced to them through the small network of batá drummers who reside in Australia. Miniconi is a French *omo aña* whom I contacted through YouTube after encountering his video uploads that capture batá drumming in Cuba. All of the informants have travelled to Cuba multiple times and have learnt, performed, and become initiated *omo aña*, studying with a number of different batá teachers in Havana and Santiago de Cuba. While these experiences are each unique, I believe there are common themes that emerge from their stories that are shared by many, if not most, foreigners who have travelled to Cuba and become involved in ceremonial batá performance.

Music Tourism in Cuba

Over the preceding two and a half decades, tourism has become an entrenched and vital component of the Cuban economy. Cuban musicians have benefited from this growth (Moore 2006: 230). As tourists seek entertainment whilst in Cuba, musicians have been provided with more performance opportunities than in the past. Areas heavily frequented by tourists are awash with bars featuring live bands that entertain the mainly foreign patrons. While this provides economic opportunities for Cuban musicians, the global interest in Cuban music has also created a new tourist market: tourists visiting Cuba wanting not just to hear Cuban music, but to learn how to play it.

A brief survey of the internet reveals that Cuban percussion lessons feature prominently in advertised tour packages to Cuba. There are a number of English-speaking websites offering short package tours of Cuba, which include percussion lessons and accommodation.⁴ Some short Spanish courses in Cuba even offer percussion lessons as an “extra.”⁵ These tours also include attendance at musical performances, as well as other cultural outings designed to complement the program. Percussion lessons are advertised as being conducted by a Cuban percussionist, invariably described as a professional musician with a long-standing reputation. One operation in Australia periodically conducting percussion tours to Cuba is run by one person, who utilizes contacts he has made in earlier visits to Cuba to facilitate these tours. In effect, people like this are acting as culture brokers, offering musical travel tours to an international market, and relying on a previously established network of service-providers in Cuba. Cubans themselves have little ability to promote these services internationally, being unable to easily access internet and other communication technologies that are often taken for granted in the West. International, informal partnerships have therefore become one method through which Cubans can access and promote their musical services at a global level.

Tourism and Afro-Cuban culture

Afro-Cuban music and religious expressions are an important part of the cultural tourism industry in Cuba (Bodenheimer 2013: 188; Scarpaci 1998: 105). Afro-Cuban folkloric performance groups are a common sight in many tourist centres in Cuba, often performing a pastiche of Afro-Cuban religious and secular musical traditions. This invariably includes batá drumming. Since the 1960s, staged performances of Afro-Cuban musical traditions have become

a common sight in Cuba. But whereas these were initially organized as domestic entertainment, today they play an important role in Cuba's cultural tourism sector. One of the most well-known of these folkloric groups, the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba* (CFNC), has established weekly performances aimed primarily at the tourist market. This group also offers one of the few officially sanctioned courses available in Afro-Cuban percussion for foreigners. Their two-week "International Folklore Laboratories" course offers percussion lessons that have a strong focus on batá drumming.⁶

Outside of these officially sanctioned programs, opportunities exist for attendance at authentic toque performance. At one of the first toques I attended, I was surprised to find another two tourists who had been brought to the event by an unofficial "tour guide."⁷ I am also aware of other instances where tourists have been invited to attend toque performances. While seeing tourists at toques is still not common, it would appear that these events have become a part of some tourists' experiences in Cuba.

Building Bridges to Cuba

While there are some official channels through which foreign batá drummers may seek out tuition, many foreigners who engage in learning batá drumming are likely to rely on informal networks to connect with batá teachers that exist outside of these official channels. These networks are the result of transnational connections that are often based on globalized networks of religious affiliation (Beliso-De Jesus 2013). Dominic Kirk reflects here on how he made his initial batá contacts in Cuba:

Ah, they were recommended by another good friend, a Cuban friend, who lives here now in Sydney [Australia]. I told him I was going and he said, "Okay, there's only one person you can possibly stay with and that's my godmother. So go and stay with her and she'll hook you up." (interview, May 12, 2015)

Here, the term godmother (Spanish *madrina*) signifies a ritual relationship that exists in santería between an initiate and his or her ritual "parent." Dominic's Cuban contact was not a batá player herself, but was a *santera*, an initiated priestess of santería. Because of this association, she was able to provide Dominic with contacts to ceremonial batá drummers. The initial contacts Dominic made through his friend's godmother wound up providing him with an introduction to batá music in its religious context.

I went there, and the woman who I went to stay with and live [with] was a Santera. And her uncle, actually her cousin, he's a *babalawo*⁸ with his own drums and his own *aña*. So I was immediately plugged into them. And then also, the drummers who took those drums out, they all lived around the way, around the corner. And there was another *olúbatá*⁹ who was a close family friend around the corner ... There were tambores happening left, right, and centre. So I had access to our own family, and a whole slew of other drums and other drummers, and such a big community. (interview with Dominic Kirk, May 12, 2015)

Owing to batá drumming's important function in santería ceremonies, the networks that exist around its practice are closely tied to the religious practice of santería. Communities of santería practice forge ties through ritual kinship. For foreigners seeking to learn and perform ceremonial batá drumming, the ability to tap into Cuban batá drumming networks sometimes relies on their ability to connect with the wider community of santería practice. Often these religious affiliations are reinforced by early attendance at toque performances:

Back then it was my first time and I remember going to that house just around the corner in Old Havana. I remember when I saw it happening. You probably remember that it starts with the *oru seco*. It's otherwise known as the *oru igbodú*. That's the first strong memory of batá I have, watching the *oru seco* in this house with this huge altar. I think it was for *Obatalá*.¹⁰ [I remember] the smell of all these cakes they had in there, this sugary smell. That was a very vivid memory because I didn't understand it at all, I just thought ... I want to be able to play this. (interview with Adrian Hearn, April 27, 2015)

A number of scholars have analysed the way that transnational networks function amongst the globalized santería community (Beliso-De Jesus 2013; Knauer 2005). While some scholars have documented the emergence of state-controlled santería tourism, so called *santurismo* (Hagedorn 2001; Scarpaci 1998), my own observations lead me to believe that the majority of these networks are centred around what Kevin Delgado characterizes as "unofficial transnational networks" (Delgado 2014: 145), those networks that exist outside of state control. In the case of batá drumming, these networks are

created and sustained through personal connections made in Cuba, and are often tied to the practice of santería. But even though the connections may be made before heading to Cuba, once in Cuba foreigners are able to create their own networks: “Once I hooked up with everything and everyone, you know ... you hook yourself up again and again and again” (interview with Dominic Kirk, May 12, 2015).

This “snowball” effect is something that is born out of a willingness to engage in a particular cultural setting and activity. While many tourists in Cuba will stay within the structured confines of the commonly visited tourist areas and only meet those Cubans who service this sector, the music pilgrim is actively looking to develop relationships with those who might help him or her to realize their musical goals.

Learning Batá

Teaching music and dance to foreigners has become one of the main ways in which Afro-Cubans engage with the tourist industry (Bodenheimer 2013: 188). Batá drummers, the majority of whom are Afro-Cuban, are well aware of the international interest that this practice has now generated, and many are willing to teach foreigners the rhythms that form the liturgical repertoire of batá drumming. Many of the relationships that start through the informal connections noted above are initially motivated by the desire of the foreigner to learn batá drumming, and the desire of the Cuban teacher to earn much-needed income.

Traditionally, ceremonial batá drummers learn through observation and participation at ceremonial performances. The acts of learning, teaching, and performing are not separate (Schweitzer 2003: 95). This process of immersive learning and teaching is time-consuming, and it may take a number of years before a batá drummer is considered competent in ritual performance. Most music pilgrims who come to Cuba may only stay for a few weeks, or perhaps months. Owing to this time constraint, Cuban batá drummers have developed different methods for teaching foreigners.

In a number of musical cultures, most notably the West, private, one-on-one studio music lessons are standard pedagogical practice. But with Cuban batá drumming this has not traditionally been the case. Schweitzer has noted that the introduction of one-on-one, private tuition is a relatively recent development in Cuban batá, and it is generally “cultural outsiders” who participate in these types of lessons (Schweitzer 2003: 232). While cultural outsiders can include Cubans who come from outside the culture of santería

practice, private lessons are more commonly associated with pedagogical approaches used to teach foreigners. Instead of a slow process of immersion, observation, and participation, foreigners are immediately granted the opportunity to pick up a batá drum and learn. In this environment, lessons are conducted for a set duration and for a pre-arranged amount of money: “He was always charging for the classes, and he was quite straight ... Like you have one or two hours of classes and you take it and that’s it” (interview with Antoine Miniconi, May 21, 2015). “Three times a week is his thing. But you know, Miki is a very business-orientated guy. [You] would arrive for class, and as soon as it was over, the class was over. And [you] would be expected to leave” (interview with Adrian Hearn, April 27, 2015).

While there is no history of this pedagogical method in traditional batá drumming, one-on-one music teaching is still common in many other areas of musical study in Cuba. Borrowing this method, batá teachers ensure that they are able to provide a familiar learning setting for foreign students, and one that best suits the time constraints of tourist travel while offering much higher financial rewards to the batá teacher than state-based musical employment.¹¹

But while these reasons may have resulted in the provision of more formalized class settings, the actual process of teaching is still based on the traditional method of aural transmission. In recent years a number of books of batá transcriptions have been published in the USA and Europe, yet learning batá through notation is still rare in Cuba. The transmission of batá drumming is still viewed as something that must be accomplished through listening and imitation, something that occurs more commonly in the context of toque performance. Foreign students who are accustomed to using written notation during lessons often find that Cuban batá teachers do not regard this skill as being of high value:

You could write down stuff but it was kind of funny for them, because for them it was like losing time. Because you just sit and you have one hour ... You try to memorize, and you’re learning, and you play, but some students, and I did [this], write it down, but it takes time ... So you lose time ... But ... the teachers ... What they want you [to do] is to play it. You can write it down and record it ... but the thing [is], you have to play it. (interview with Antoine Miniconi, May 21, 2015)

Schweitzer recounts his teacher’s reaction to his use of transcription during lessons:

During our early encounters, I was a little hesitant to pull out a notebook and paper, afraid that Pancho [Schweitzer's batá teacher, Francisco "Pancho Quinto" Hernández Mora] would dislike my desire to notate rhythms. Indeed, he didn't take to it well at first; he believed it was a distraction and impeded my learning. He acquiesced to my practice when he realized that my comprehension was significantly aided by what I wrote ... When playing, I would never read from my notes. In his presence, I always played from memory ... Pancho made it clear to me, through his actions, that written notation does not accurately represent the musical tradition. (2003: 164-165)

Schweitzer's story illustrates how intercultural music learning not only opens up the student to new ways of learning, but may also cause the teacher to appreciate alternate learning methods originating from outside their own culture. Flaig notes how the process of intercultural music learning can also benefit the teacher, as they learn how to better represent their musical practice through Western-imported techniques such as transcription (Flaig 2010: 39). While I have yet to witness a Cuban batá teacher writing or correcting a transcription, there remains the possibility that continued interaction with foreign students may lead to Cuban batá teachers developing these skills and inclinations.

Initiation

To perform on the sacred drums used in religious ceremonies, batá drummers are expected to undergo initiation ceremonies. These ceremonies confirm that the orisha *añá* has accepted the drummer, allowing him to play batá *fundamento*. Often a simpler initiation, known as "washing the hands" (Spanish *lavando las manos*), is bestowed upon those who show a commitment to learning that batá. This allows the aspiring *omo añá* to perform on batá *fundamento*, and may follow only a short period of observation by the student.¹² Full initiation as an *omo añá* may then follow at a later date. While initiation plays an important spiritual function amongst the community of *omo añá*, the wider religious community that participates in *toques* also expects ceremonial batá drummers to meet these requirements. But for foreigners, they may at first be unaware of these expectations, as was the case with Adrian:

I think that what happened was he [Miki, Adrian's principal batá teacher] knew I was interested in playing in ceremonies, and he

had been taking me to toques, and I wasn't [initiated], and he would sit me to play the okónkolo. And I remember there was one tambor in Atarés one time where I played the okónkolo, and someone had a few words with him ... I didn't know what they were saying, but I thought they were talking about me. So I asked Miki about it later and he said, "They were upset because you're not [initiated] and you're playing the toque." And I said, "Well, do you have to be [initiated] to play ceremonies," because I didn't know that at the time. And he said yes. And I was pretty angry with him, because I thought, "what the hell are you doing, putting me to play in a tambor, and I'm not omo ña. And that's the last thing that I want, is to be this guy who's breaking the rules." (interview, April 27, 2015)

While Adrian's teacher was not concerned that Adrian was uninitiated, it did concern some of the participants at the toque. During informal conversations, I have been told that, in the early stages of learning, batá drummers are not necessarily initiated before performing at toques. It would be unlikely for an uninitiated Cuban batá drummer (as opposed to a foreign batá drummer) to have his credentials as an initiated drummer questioned by a participant. Adrian's position as a foreigner immediately marked him out for closer inspection, suggesting that participants may be concerned foreigners do not meet the expectations usually required of batá drummers performing in toques, in turn reflecting concerns that some batá teachers are more interested in developing commercially advantageous relationships with foreign students than in upholding the religious requirements of santería practice. While not specifically related to batá drumming, some scholars have noted that the increasing presence of foreigners in Cuba participating in santería has generated concern about the dilution of traditional practices amongst Cuban practitioners (Delgado 2014: 153; Hagedorn 2001: 221).

But aside from concerns that he was bending the rules, once Adrian was initiated as an omo ña, he found that he was easily accepted into the fraternity of omo ña:

So inevitably, in order to get practice, I was making friends with people and rocking up to play at their tambores. And the first question you get asked doing that, especially as a foreigner, is, "Are you omo ña?" And if you say no, they'll probably say you can watch then but you can't touch. But if you're omo ña, you get invited. It's almost like ... they want to welcome you into it

because you play the drums. So yeah, in that sense it does change the relationship. (interview, April 27, 2015)

While performance opportunities are greatly increased through initiation, Dominic found that being omo ña also brought with it an increased sense of community and belonging: “I think ... it feels like it should. You’re entering a spiritual fraternity, which then had new levels of ... brotherhood, and respect and friendship. So it was a good thing, a good feeling” (interview, May 12, 2015).

Initiation as omo ña also brings with it a change in the learning process. Whereas learning is initially conducted in a lesson setting, after initiation, learning comes to be more closely associated with observation and participation at toques. Students are not expected to pay for these performance opportunities, and instead may receive a part of the *derecho*, or fee, that batá drummers receive for their performance. Thus the model of learning and teaching comes much closer to the traditional methods:

And then, the second time I went, it wasn’t a question of formal classes, but more just going to tambores everyday, or every second day, and just sitting and playing and watching. So the first time it was very formal and from the second time onwards it was just going to tambores every day. (interview with Dominic Kirk, May 12, 2015)

For Antoine, asking questions was also an important part of this learning process:

And after that I used to learn by just asking. Because when you go to a lot of ceremonies, you begin to understand things, and then there’s some things that you don’t understand. But when you ask, another guy tells you, “no, it’s like that.” “Ah, okay.” You don’t take classes anymore, you’re just there and you just understand a lot of things. (interview, May 21, 2015)

Initiation involves an engagement in the cultural processes that characterize traditional learning behaviours associated with ceremonial Cuban batá drumming. While foreigners may begin by taking private classes with Cuban batá drummers, once initiated they often find that learning is enhanced through observation, participation, and the ability to ask questions. Being accepted into the fraternity of the omo ña allows foreigners to engage in

culturally specific learning behaviours that are not available to those who are not initiated. This process involves a deepening of the tourist experience, one through which tourists may in fact come close to replicating the experiences of their Cuban counterparts, at least as it relates to ceremonial batá performance.

Developing Relationships

As Titon observed, ethnomusicological fieldwork is “at its best based on a model of friendship between people” (1992: 321). But this ideal is something that could be extended well beyond the limits of ethnomusicology. While the people I have been discussing are not ethnomusicologists, their time in Cuba has resulted in the formation of strong bonds of friendship between them and ceremonial Cuban batá drummers:

They were my best friends as well. And it sort of happened naturally because I went there not knowing anyone, and I got a whole bunch of classes from the family that were recommended, you know, friends and family. And then within a very short time they became my friends and family, and it was just that. In a very short period of time when we weren't playing together we were always hanging out. (interview with Dominic Kirk, May 12, 2015)

Bodenheimer has pointed out that, even though genuine friendships between Cubans and foreigners occur, these are often coloured by the economic inequalities that are always present (2013: 191). Initially, the economic motivations of the teacher and the learning motivations of the student may be the dominant factors in the relationship. But as these relationships develop, the student often finds more meaningful connections with their Cuban teachers that go beyond purely musical goals. This includes providing a sense of safety and security in a foreign culture: “They were like my family in Cuba, because I really understood a lot of things from them, and they took care of me” (interview with Antoine Miniconi, May 21, 2015).

The formation of friendships is something that is crucial to the success of group performance amongst ceremonial batá drummers. Kenneth Schweitzer uses the concept of *communitas* to describe how batá ensembles strive to create a sense of unity and “oneness” during performance (2003: 239). While this is achieved in a number of ways, I would suggest that the friendships formed between ceremonial drummers are an important part of this process. While

a Cuban may initially teach a foreigner how to play batá drums for economic gain, I argue that in the process of becoming *omo aña*, a foreigner's position as a tourist is transformed in a limited way. Roland (2013) has noted how tourists and "hosts" only engage in limited and carefully scripted ways that best satisfy the desires of the tourist. But when foreigners engage in ceremonial batá drumming, these postures are affected by the addition of criteria outside of the tourist sphere. When engaged in *toque* performance one's ability to fulfil the role of a ceremonial drummer makes foreignness a secondary concern, and the application of musical skills to meet ceremonial objectives is prioritized. Through competent performance, a foreigner can come to be accepted as an equal amongst batá drummers, at least for the duration of the performance. The bonds that are formed are facilitated through sharing musical experience, a powerful force that has the potential to change the dynamics of the relationship between foreign students and Cuban batá drummers.

Giving Back: Collaborations Between Cubans and Foreigners

While I have shown that relationships between Cuban batá drummers and their foreign students can develop from more formal student-teacher ones to acceptance within the community of ceremonial batá drummers, and even friendship, the Cuban-foreign relationship remains unequal. Cuban batá drummers have limited financial power, face very limited prospects for travel, and do not possess the ability to communicate freely and easily on the internet. One result of this is that Cuban batá drummers find it difficult to market themselves to potential clients who live outside of Cuba. For some Cubans, relationships with foreigners may give them access to global networks of communication and promotion that are not otherwise available from inside Cuba. Antoine, for example, was able to help his primary batá teachers in Cuba develop an international profile that has expanded their network of foreign students.

Antoine conceived of recording a series of batá video lessons that featured his teacher, Manley Lopez. Manley Lopez is a member of a famous family of Afro-Cuban percussionists, commonly known as *Los Chinitos*, who are active in performing both secular Afro-Cuban styles such as rumba, and performing on batá drums at *toques*. While initially designed for a commercial release, Antoine eventually released these videos for free on YouTube.¹³ Though the initial reaction was slow, a number of people from around the world soon started contacting Antoine, enquiring how to get in touch with Manley and Los Chinitos:

It took like two, three, four years. And after that more and more people got crazy about [Los] Chinitos. And now, they have people from all over the world. From South America, Europe, it's great. They have a lot of people and everybody knows them now. (interview, May 21, 2015)

For Antoine, the ability to help those who he considered his “Cuban family” was extremely gratifying. In 2011, Antoine was even able to bring Manley Lopez to Europe to conduct teaching workshops. In this case, the possible consequences of Los Chinitos’ relationship with Antoine could not have been a motivating factor in their decision to teach him. It took years for the videos on YouTube to start generating international interest, and the eventual reaction could not have been guessed by either Antoine or Los Chinitos. But these videos were able to provide Los Chinitos with opportunities to expand their international network of foreign students far beyond the scope at which informal transnational networks normally work:

And with the videos, they [other foreigners] could ask me ... And it was much easier to get in touch with [Los Chinitos]. So after that, if one guy goes, and he goes back to his country, he can say, “Now I saw them and this is the contact and you can go there, and [you] go and meet [Los Chinitos]” ... So after that it was much easier for people to go there. So now they have a lot of people there all the time. (interview with Antoine Miniconi, May 21, 2015)

The internet offers users opportunities for global promotion. At the moment, though, Cubans have difficulty accessing this technology. While this may change in the near future, at present the majority of the population does not have regular online access. As I noted earlier, partnerships between foreigners and Cuban musicians are often shaped by the inequalities of access that restrict Cubans from globalized networks of communication. Foreigners who come to Cuba have the potential to offer proxy access to the internet, which may give some Cuban *batá* players the opportunity to promote themselves to a larger, foreign network. While this highlights on one level the power imbalances between foreigners and Cubans, it also points towards ways that partnerships may offer some Cubans a chance to develop a more sustainable teaching model.

Conclusion

For many non-Cubans who come to perform batá drumming in ceremonies in Cuba, there is a sense of belonging to a fraternity. My first experience playing in a batá ceremony was, not to put it too lightly, an unmitigated disaster. The drummer who had been teaching me asked me if I wanted to play the itótele drum during a toque. Without thinking, I replied yes. I thought, well, if he thinks I can do it, then why not? It quickly became apparent that I was in way over my head. My teacher, realizing I could not keep up, sat down on top of the drum that was sitting on my lap, and began to play the skins with his hands behind his back. All I could do was sit there, while his hands played the batá.

Afterwards, feeling very embarrassed, I was outside getting some air. Another batá player was there. I was expressing my embarrassment to him, when he placed his hand against my forehead, and called me *abure*. This gesture is a sign of ritual respect in santería, and the word *abure* is usually glossed as “brother” in the religious lexicon of santería. I could not express the feeling of gratitude I had for this action at the time. It said to me, “don’t worry, we all make mistakes, but you are one of us, and we accept you.”

After the toque had finished, all of the drummers were outside. Apart from my earlier embarrassment, I now felt that I was a part of this experience, that I was not looking from the outside anymore. Then one of the drummers abruptly turned towards me and said, “You get to leave this place. I cannot.” At once I was struck with the distance that really existed between me and my Cuban counterparts. In that simple sentence, he had shown me up as the *extranjero* that I really was.

This paper has explored the processes and experiences of foreigners who have learnt and performed ceremonial batá drumming in Cuba. Through this analysis, I have attempted to highlight how foreignness shapes these relationships. While most tourists exist in a world separated from their hosts, foreigners who engage in ceremonial batá performance come to inhabit a position that exists in the border regions, accepted as ceremonial batá drummers, but still apart, still *extranjeros*. At the same time, the level of cultural intimacy they develop towards their Cuban hosts is indicative of a desire for deeper cultural understanding than is apparent in the attitudes of most tourists who visit Cuba. The fact that this attitude extends to a music outside their own musical culture indicates to me that this appreciation of the music of the “other” can only contribute to a better understanding and appreciation of that most valuable musical resource: people. 🍀

Notes

1. See Moore and Sayre (2006) for a more thorough explanation of batá drums and their music.

2. See Sayre (2000) for a more complete explanation and discussion of this prohibition.

3. This information comes from my own research conducted amongst the globalized batá community, as well as my research documenting ceremonial batá drumming on YouTube.

4. Examples of these sites can be found at <http://www.sprachcaffe-cuba.com/learn-courses-lessons-cuba/cuba-drumming-drums-rhythms.htm>; <https://www.danzaymovimiento.com/travel/cuba-travel-drum-percussion.php>; <http://cuban-culturaltravel.com/music-tours-lessons/>; <http://www.bailarencuba.com/lacasa-delson/index.php/en/2014-05-08-05-47-01/cuban-percussion-classes>.

5. See, for example, Enforex (<http://www.enforex.com/courses-cuban-music.html>).

6. See <http://www.folkcuba.cult.cu/laboratory.htm> for an outline of the percussion courses offered.

7. These unofficial tour guides are known as *jineteros*, or “jockeys.” While the term *jinetero* is often used pejoratively to describe a person who takes advantage of tourists for financial gain, some may in fact offer tourists unique experiences that are unavailable through official tourist channels.

8. *Babalawos* are a separate priesthood in *santería* specialising in divination.

9. The *olúbatá* is the ritual “owner” of batá fundamento.

10. *Obatalá* is one of the pantheon of orisha worshipped in *santería*.

11. The average Cuban wage is the equivalent of \$15-\$25 USD per month, while prices charged for lessons may vary from \$5-\$30 USD for between one and three hours.

12. The length of period before one receives the necessary initiations to perform at toques may vary. While “washing the hands” might occur very quickly, the more expensive initiation to become an *omo aña* may not be undertaken for a number of years.

13. All videos appear on Antoine’s YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/apozo82>).

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