

CROSSING DIASPORA'S BORDERS: MUSICAL ROOTS EXPERIENCES AND THE EURO-AMERICAN PRESENCE IN AFRO-CUBAN RELIGIOUS MUSIC¹

by

NOLAN WARDEN

In this essay I consider the limits of the African Diaspora as a heuristic and cultural concept; namely, that it does not help us understand the presence of Euro-Americans (or anyone not of recent African descent) in Afro-Cuban religious music, especially as it is practiced in the United States. As a potentially more useful heuristic, I discuss what I call a musical “roots experience.” In doing so, I argue that recent Euro-American interest in Afro-Cuban music is a logical result of a search for a historicized cultural self, quite similar to that of African-Americans.² In this way, the framework of a “roots experience” highlights experiential similarities across an ethnically diverse community of practitioners, whereas relying on the concept of the African Diaspora could possibly reinforce racial barriers.

The definition of *diaspora*, and the African Diaspora in particular, has become increasingly multivalent as it spreads to different academic and popular domains. As Rogers Brubaker has pointed out, most definitions of diaspora tend to revolve around three central elements: a dispersion of people, usually migrating across borders (forced or not); an orientation to a real or imagined homeland, or the reconstruction of a culture away from that homeland; and the maintenance of group boundaries to preserve a distinct identity within a host society (2005:5). While these elements make perfect sense for Afro-Cuban music in Cuba, it hardly explains the spread and development of Afro-Cuban music and religion in the United States. Especially for African-American and Euro-American musicians who were not born into the religion, the dispersal model does not fit. Though an imagined historical Africa is certainly considered to be the ultimate source for Afro-Cuban religious music, from the perspective of the United States the immediate source is Cuba itself. It would also be rather misguided to think of Afro-Cuban religious communities in the U.S. as having

¹ This article is the slightly expanded and revised version of the paper that won the African Music Section student paper prize at the 2009 meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology in Mexico City. The author views it as the first public presentation of what is intended to be a long-term project leading towards lengthier works. As such, comments and criticisms are invited (nolanwarden@hotmail.com). I wish to thank reviewers for their helpful comments and *African Music* for the opportunity to publish this article.

² I hyphenate *African-American* to draw a connection with *Euro-American*. Though labels are always problematic, I feel that these terms better represent the theoretical spirit of this work, looking for concepts and representational strategies with unifying force while questioning terms that have divisive intent, history, or results. Hence, I reject the terms *black* and *white*.

a homogeneous identity with a “host society.” How, for example, would the concept of the African Diaspora have analytic value for understanding Afro-Cuban practices in the U.S. when its communities are constituted by large numbers of Caribbean people of all complexions, Mexicans, Asians, African-Americans, Euro-Americans of Jewish and Protestant heritage, and so on? In such a context, it becomes clear why Brubaker suggests that we think of the African Diaspora not so much as an entity but as a stance, claim, or practice (12).

What stance or action would be taken if we try to understand Afro-Cuban music in the U.S. merely through the concept of the African Diaspora? Consider a rather orthodox definition of the term by Joseph E. Harris: the African Diaspora is a “global dispersion... of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition; and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa” (1993:3). He goes on to state that this diaspora stretches across “time, geography, class, and gender” (4). It does not, however, stretch across race. In this way, if we were to talk of Afro-Cuban music in the U.S. as part of the African Diaspora, it would grant the legitimate presence of some people based on perceived racial appropriateness and exclude many more. We would then need a separate but equal theory to explain the presence of people of non-African descent in these musical religious communities. This study looks for a more inclusive manner of understanding this phenomenon, looking first at the spread of Afro-Cuban religious music in the U.S., and then considering experiences had by both African-Americans and Euro-Americans as they approached the religious communities through the music.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the United States began to see an exponential growth in the number of people practicing Afro-Cuban religions such as *Palo*, *Espiritismo*, and *Regla de Ocha* (also known as *Santería*). Though originally practiced discreetly and primarily by Cubans, by the 1960’s a number of African-Americans had adopted the religion, often as an extension of Black Nationalism or Pan-Africanism. Because music—and drumming in particular—is necessary to practice Afro-Cuban religions, increased numbers of practitioners meant a greater demand for drummers, one that could not be met by the limited number of Cuban drummers in the U.S. In the 1960’s, a handful of African-American drummers, some Latinos, and at least one Euro-American were adequate to meet the growing demand. In 1980, the Mariel boatlift brought many Afro-Cuban drummers to the U.S. who began teaching an ethnically diverse group of drum students. By the late 1990’s, a growing percentage of drummers for Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies were of Euro-American descent. In some rare instances today, people of Cuban or African descent can be a minority; here we encounter a difficult paradox.

The paradox appears because we are accustomed to thinking of Afro-Cuban music and religion as part of the African Diaspora, for obvious historical reasons. But when a term meant for a dispersion of people is extended to intangibles, it is probably only a matter of time before the term becomes problematic. When our only conceptual tool for this musical and religious phenomenon in the United States is the African Diaspora,

it is mostly unhelpful, and in some ways potentially pernicious in that it excludes many practitioners since it conflates culture with phenotype. The continued politicizing of cultural phenomena as essences of race can be seen even in the work of constructivists such as Paul Gilroy, who states that “black music is so often the principal symbol of racial authenticity” (1993:34). This is particularly troublesome in that the use of terms such as *black*, *white*, and even the word *Africa*, shows how difficult it is to avoid using a lexicon ingrained during the height of European imperialism and the era of Atlantic slavery. In the academy, then, it seems we are nearly incapable of speaking about such cultural phenomena with anything other than terms developed with divisive intent. These racialized terms become the paradoxical tools to police essentialized notions of cultural ownership. Experience, then, even when strikingly similar across racial identities, has its meaning herded into an *a priori* discourse that presumes, articulates, and enforces difference.

The presumption of difference as a foundational premise in the field of ethnomusicology has received much-needed criticism in Kofi Agawu's book, *Representing African Music* (2003). The issues raised by Agawu are not entirely unlike those I have mentioned above, though he would add that “by constructing phenomena, objects, or people as ‘different,’ one stakes a claim to power over them” (156). Though Agawu is speaking of the academy's use of the African Diaspora concept to essentialize Africa and Africans, African-Americans, using the same tactic, could challenge access to or ownership of music considered to be “theirs.” As a remedy to the premise of difference, Agawu posits that “an embrace of sameness might... prompt a fresh critique of essentialism” (169).³ He gives us no method for this, stating only that attending to sameness is simply “a presence of mind, an attitude, a way of seeing the world” (169). It is with this attitude that I endeavored to conduct my study of Afro-Cuban religious music in the United States.

This study is based upon formal ethnographic work conducted primarily in San Francisco, Oakland, and Chicago during 2009. I also draw from personal experience as a drummer for Afro-Cuban ceremonies and informal research in the Afro-Cuban music communities of Boston, New York City, and Los Angeles, and Cuba itself. My purpose was, per Agawu, to presuppose sameness and look particularly at the experiences of African-Americans and Euro-Americans who were *not* born into Afro-Cuban culture or religion but came to it through the music.⁴ To avoid possible issues associated with

³ Though I am taking Agawu's suggestions to heart for this work, there are some unclear aspects to his assumptions. How, for example, would a new “embrace of sameness” in music be much different from 19th century studies of “non-Western” music through the lens of Western music theory and assumptions? One might also say that the historical embrace of sameness was precisely what ethnomusicologists were struggling against in order to think of musical cultures *in* and *on* their own terms, thus resisting ideas of Western musical superiority or power over others.

⁴ I have intentionally avoided inserting Latino experiences into this mix first, because the supposed dichotomy of “blacks” and “whites” is precisely what I'm calling into question. Thus, focusing on these self-identified groups will hopefully make my argument for experiential similarities that much stronger. I have also avoided considering Latinos in this study because many could claim a stronger “birthright” to Afro-Cuban culture if they

dilettantism, I focused only on musicians considered by religious practitioners to be highly competent, as evidenced by their frequent employment as drummers or singers in religious ceremonies. In my interviews, I paid particular attention to similar or even identical experiences that tend to be construed as different as a result of being bound up within racialized interpretations and modes of discourse.

In looking for sameness, it is best to start where the musicians started: with the music. After summarizing musical experiences in this phenomenon, I will discuss how the music also fulfills needs for things such as the creation of community (both musical and religious); the acknowledgement and honoring of ancestors; and the path towards self-discovery through historicization—what I call a *roots experience*.

Music was the initial reason that all of my interviewees became interested in Afro-Cuban culture. While only a few have been initiated into Santería or Palo, all see the music as their primary role or responsibility in the religion. By all accounts, their interest was initially peaked by what was perceived as a simultaneous complexity and simplicity of the music; a cerebral rhythmic puzzle to be studied and a sonic statement of musical truth. For one African-American, *batá* drumming opened what he called a “new vista” for learning to listen to music. Most spoke of an obsession with the art of Afro-Cuban drumming, and one Euro-American called it a means of “liberation.” Interestingly, almost every interviewee expressed some sort of feeling that the learning process seemed “natural.” Although one person told me “it’s *all* about the music,” the layers of music’s significance are much deeper than the sound itself.

In the words of one drummer, the music and religion “fill what you need [them] to fill,” and one of the most common needs is that of community. For some African-Americans, this means community empowerment through racial reclamation of “traditional African religion.” Community is also an incredibly important motivation for many Euro-Americans who would like to reclaim the communal aspects of music making that many felt have been lost in today’s music. One Euro-American told me that “the whole point” of the music is that everyone sings and partakes together, once even referring to his drumming colleagues as a “clan.” All musicians acknowledged at least some satisfaction with their role as servants of the religious community. Many had a tendency towards elitist notions of Afro-Cuban music, reveling in its esoteric nature and wanting to bring its gifts to other people. In a particularly intriguing sense of community, the well-known African-American percussionist Bill Summers recounts his initiation into a group of famous Cuban drummers in a self-published book on *batá* drumming. In his words, this was a process tantamount to “joining [their] family.” Likewise, a well-known Euro-American percussionist who was initiated by the same drummers a number of years earlier, referred to the process as an “adoption.” In the same book Summers refers to his Euro-American counterpart as a “god-brother.”

were raised in Spanish-speaking communities and at least somewhat aware of Afro-Cuban religious practices from an early age. Nevertheless, informal research over the years leads me to believe that a “roots experience” would equally account for many Latinos who come to Afro-Cuban religions later in life.

Although assertion of cross-racial fictive kinship is nothing new in Afro-Cuban religion, it is a positive sign and a foil for conceptual frameworks that cannot account for such phenomena.

Another realm of similarity that became salient through my interviews was the importance of ancestors. Working from the concept of the African Diaspora, it might seem that this experience would be pertinent only to African-Americans. For example, Bill Summers published statements about what he called his "traditional culture." Likewise, an African-American singer told me that the religion was important to her because "[her] ancestors brought the religion here." A fascinating example was documented in 1969 in New York City in which African-Americans gathered in what they called a Yoruba Temple and used what they learned from Cubans to invoke ancestral leaders of Pan-Africanism and Black Nationalism. These examples fit within the concept of the African Diaspora, but they are analogous to practices of Euro-Americans who *also* find that the religion provides relationships with their ancestors. As one Euro-American drummer told me, "for me, [this] fills the appreciation of my ancestors... through this I have at least a relationship with them... the *eggún* stuff is really close to my heart." The Lucumí or Yoruba word *eggún*, referring to the ancestors, was also invoked by another Euro-American drummer who attributed to *eggún* his interest in Afro-Cuban music and eventual initiation into the religion. Personally, I have also found this aspect of Afro-Cuban religion important. Though uninitiated, my wife and I keep a Cuban-style shrine for the dead, covered with photos of grandparents from Indiana and Mexico, and also photos of others such as the late Ghanaian drummer Alhaji Abubakari Lunna and the recently deceased Afro-Cuban drummer Francisco Aguabella. Thus, for myself and most participants in the U.S., the model for honoring the ancestors comes from Cuba, and the ancestors themselves are personal but not necessarily biological.

Complementing the importance of community and ancestors, another salient aspect of my research has revealed a process that we could call a "roots experience." Admittedly, the concept of roots, and the term itself, is poorly defined and often utilized without definition to insinuate authenticity. This is certainly the case with the way it has been employed in relation to the African Diaspora, but its use does not seem to have ever been studied closely. Gilroy states that the term *roots* has been employed mostly within "political" movements associated with black nationhood or statehood. The term has also been widely used, especially over the past few decades, to talk about any music that historicizes or authenticates musical experience. This can be seen clearly in instances such as the 2001 public television series and media releases called simply *American Roots Music*, which nostalgically portrayed early music of America's various ethnic groups as the soul of today's popular music.

When I say a roots *experience*, then, I am not passing judgment on the veracity of the roots trope, nor am I using it as an uncritical metaphor for history. Instead, I am referring to the experience of uncovering what one believes to be the authentic history of one's own cultural practices. Elements of the experience are similar across racial

identities and cultures as they encompass and reveal ideas about history, authenticity, sincerity, truth, and hidden meanings. Most importantly, the roots experience is a search or journey. One has to seek out roots, and that seeking is the experience itself — it accomplishes for the individual a logical self-historicizing.

We can understand the presence of both Euro-Americans and African-Americans in Afro-Cuban religious music as a result of this roots experience. While it may seem paradoxical that Euro-Americans would “find themselves” and their musical history in Afro-Cuban culture, this may be only because we are still deeply inculcated to connect culture with race. When we move beyond that confusion, we can understand Brenda Dixon Gottschild, who said “for Americans, the Africanist legacy is not a choice but an imperative that comes to us through the culture” (89). Though maybe not with the same intent, in a work entitled, “Africanisms in African-American Music” (1990), Portia Maultsby draws a complex diagram of African-American music such as jazz, blues, rock, and so on and traces all of these directly to what she labels “West African Music Roots.” This shows a penchant, even in the academic realm, to focus on some “roots” connections more than others. Therefore, if Euro-Americans consider themselves to be full and authentic participants in rock music, it would be a logical “roots experience” for them to connect their current musical world to an historical Africa. This would be just as logical for African-Americans as it would be for Euro-Americans, Asian-Americans, people in the Americas in general, and people wherever there is African musical influence (that is to say, almost everywhere).

The roots experience came out time and again in my research. Not surprisingly, among African-American interviewees, finding a “sense of self” in Afro-Cuban music came up frequently. Bill Summers simply stated that the drumming allowed him to find his “African self.” One African-American singer mentioned how difficult it was for her to learn what she originally thought of as “crazy music” that she didn’t understand. Later, she stressed multiple times that she was looking for a “sense of self” and said that the music came “naturally” to her. For Euro-Americans, the experience of *recovering* something was the same, but couched in terms of culture rather than race. One percussionist told me about his childhood interest in soul and funk music. Later in life he felt that to understand that music he would have to study Latin American music, and from there Afro-Cuban *rumba* drumming, and then sacred drumming. To uncover the history and meaning, he said, “you gotta go backwards,” an explanation that resonated with my own early interest in Cuban drumming. Another Euro-American drummer told me that the process was “a trek backwards... to search about where we came from... the origin of everything.” He narrated his roots experience: “Right before I discovered jazz, I discovered [the rock band] Phish... they started playing all these complicated lines and I said ‘what the hell is this?’ Then I discovered jazz, and I said ‘what the hell is this?’ Then I went to African music straight away and I said ‘I don’t know anything.’ It was a roots discovery, journey thing.” A drummer who grew up in Vermont listening to death metal and hip-hop told me that he now sees those as “watered down versions of what the *batá* carries.”

It is interesting to consider that Cuba is unquestionably the source for the imagined Africa of this roots experience. But why not Africa itself? Besides the fact that Cuba is often seen as a site of so-called survivals, the main reason may be that a roots experience is more easily achieved in the U.S. by connecting to an imagined Africa via the Caribbean. This roots-making project is taken up by a number of academics, journalists, and musician-scholars. Consider the well-known book by journalist John Storm Roberts called *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States* (1999). Read by innumerable musicians, the book begins with a chapter simply called "The Roots," which outlines the impact in the U.S. of the Afro-Cuban rhythmic timeline called *clave*. A more academic take can be seen in Christopher Washburne's article, "The Clave of Jazz," where he states that "the frequency of [Cuban] rhythms in early jazz suggests that the Caribbean influence was so tied to its developmental stages that the rhythms became part of the rhythmic foundation of jazz" (75). Interestingly, Washburne, an ethnomusicologist, often performs with percussionist Bobby Sanabria, a community-scholar of sorts with a vast knowledge of the history of Latin American music. Sanabria is known for his musical lecture demonstrations, which portray genres such as funk and rock as fundamentally based on Cuban *clave*. Like many percussionists I can credit my earliest fascination with Cuban music to Sanabria's presentations. Another percussionist, John Santos, does similar history presentations and is a teacher or colleague of almost all of my interviewees. Such influences in the Afro-Cuban music community explain the necessity of Cuba in what Stephan Palmié calls the "fundamentally emergent nature" of the African past (2008:32). It also helps to explain how playing *batá* can, as Bill Summers wrote, take you to "another place and another time." Such a statement by an African-American seems understandable and resonates in the academic work of Ingrid Monson when she stated that "in contemporary African diasporic cultural sensibilities, music is often a place" (2000:2). But this sensibility is not unique to people of African descent. It is shared, as I have argued, at least by Euro-Americans, and probably by all people who participate. One Euro-American who has studied music in both Africa and Cuba told me that when he plays *batá* drums in a ceremony he feels he is performing history. To him, "it has a very timeless element to it... more than timeless... time warped. It feels like you're in the *barracón* [barracks] with the enslaved Africans in Cuba."

To summarize, I have suggested that there are more similarities in the Euro-American and African-American experience of Afro-Cuban music than fit within the concept of the African Diaspora. For both groups, it transports them, creating their Africa in and of the present. For both, it historicizes their cultural world. For both, it reclaims something lost such as ancestors or communal music making. And both equally undergo a roots experience as they historicize their cultural upbringing. Unfortunately, because of the way Western imperialism continues to shape our vocabulary and thought, any sameness in this roots experience gets filed away into separate bins due to racial difference. Such racial bifurcation of experience also implicates the academy, at least to the extent that its outdated theories continue to hold popular sway. Among

all musicians I interviewed, their study materials often consisted of a predictable bibliography: Herskovits, Bascom, and Courlander, among others. Summers stated that he “reclaimed” works by Fernando Ortiz from the library. What he reclaimed, though, was not some gem of African cultural knowledge but instead the Cuban professor’s highly erroneous attempts to transcribe Afro-Cuban batá rhythms. What we see here is also a curious echo chamber between the academy and the so-called field. In this case, it began with Cuban drummers performing for Ortiz; his transcriptions then became the erroneous foundation for drummers in the U.S. for many years; this was later corrected and enriched by more accurate academic transcriptions and direct learning from Cubans (in the U.S. and in Cuba); the most recent reverberation is further academic work to figure out better ways to understand what exactly has been going on, which is where this research comes in. In such situations, Agawu claims that the presumption of *sameness* would guarantee an ethical motivation. Readers will have to decide whether my motivation here is ethical or to be branded some sort of insidious intellectual imperialism.⁵ Either way, my reception will likely be colored by race since we unfortunately cannot extricate ourselves from history. But it is hoped that we can extricate ourselves just enough to fully consider Gilroy’s claim that music’s “inner secrets and its ethnic rules can be taught and learned... the globalization of vernacular forms means that our understanding of antiphony will have to change. The calls and responses no longer converge in the tidy patterns of secret ethnically encoded dialogue. The original call is becoming harder to locate” (109-110). Clearly, we need to change our thinking about music and its relationship to concepts of race and ethnicity, but I do not agree with Gilroy that the “original call” is harder to locate. In fact, what is considered to be an “original call” is capricious and constructed equally as much as any response that follows it. Once the original is constructed, however, people will want to experience themselves in relation to it. What has changed is that if the call takes you across the remnants of imperial racial boundaries, there is no reason to halt your journey.

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⁵ If the African Diaspora can be thought of as a political stance or claim, then my ideas could equally be seen as such—a Euro-American scholar “claiming” access rights to Afro-Diasporic culture on behalf of his “race.” Hopefully it is clear that this is precisely the racialized dichotomy that I am attempting to avoid by constructing a unifying framework rather than one that inadvertently traffics divisive terms and categories in this particular context.

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