

ORISHA IN THE KEY OF LIFE:
A PRELIMINARY STUDY
ON THE AKPON IN
ORISHA MUSIC

A Thesis
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF ARTS

by
Chad E. Graham
August 2021

Thesis Approvals:

Terry Rey, Advisory Chair, Department of Religion
Zain Abdullah, Department of Religion
yaTande Whitney Hunter, Department of Dance

©
Copyright
2021

by

Chad E.Graham

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines and initiates the process of filling a gap in the academic study of Orisha Music, a subfield of Africana Religions. Despite the integral role that akpons – the song leaders – play during Lucumi drumming ceremonies, most of the major works focus on drums and/or drumming, while relegating akpons to little more than footnotes in them. This work is approached from the perspective of a scholar-practitioner and an apprenticing musician in the Lucumi tradition to consider who these song leaders are to their communities. After reviewing the aforementioned texts and analyzing the context in which akpons are situated, this thesis offers a preliminary treatise on how exactly akpons contribute to drumming ceremonies and Lucumi practice.

To Aina, who makes my world go round, and to my mother and father, whose blood flows through my veins. May this work be a reflection of what love makes possible.

Always.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my department and committee chair, Dr. Terry Rey, and my committee members, Dr. Zain Abdullah and Dr. yaTande Whitney Hunter for your support during the process of writing and defending my thesis. To the entire Religion Department, thank you all for giving me the space to sharpen my craft as a scholar over the past two years. I owe my growth as a writer to my writing group. My development in this area is a testament to necessity being in community with like minds and spirits. To my godparents, Ile Ase, my orisha music teachers, and the broader Ifa-Orisha community, I dobale(salute) you. I'm only bearing witness to what you have carefully preserved. Asante sana to the Kwame Ture Society and ASCAC for being a constant reminder of why and how we engage in this intellectual work. Most importantly, thank you to my family on this side of the water and my ancestors on the other side. I'm truly grateful for you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Approach & Methodology	3
Chapter Overview	4
Preliminary Findings	5
2. EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP & THE SUBFIELD	6
Literature Review	6
A Gap in the Subfield	14
3. “IF YOU CAN SING IT, YOU CAN PLAY IT”: THE BEMBE AS CONTEXT	16
Overview of the Yoruba Lucumi Tradition	16
The Music	19
The Ritual	21
The Stage	25
4. A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF AKPONS AT WORK	28
Exemplars	28
Akpons at Work	31

Implications and New Directions	35
5. CONCLUSION	40
BIBLIOGRAPHY	42

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In *Songs in the Key of Life*, Stevie Wonder uses his voice and artistry to reflect on all matters of life and living as an African in America.¹ This display of his humanity is accessible to everyone, without appealing to any overrepresentation of Whiteness.² Wonder lyrically and musically narrates a Black experience as he acknowledges his inspirations, remembers his childhood, mourns for his people, touches on spirituality, celebrates new life, and meditates on everything else in-between. This is no more apparent than in “As.”³ Regarded as “the greatest love song ever,” 26 year old Wonder sings about the critical relationship between love and the order of the universe. For if the world is no longer balanced or in a state of harmony, love will disappear.⁴ And inversely, if there is no love in the world, the world will be no more. He approaches his singing as an instrument accompanying the rest of the music, rather than as a soloist supported by

¹ Arguably his most popular and commercially successful work, Wonder recorded the double album over a three year period, at four different studios - Crystal Sound (Hollywood, CA), Record Plant Los Angeles, Record Plant Sausalito, and The Hit Factory (NY). Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life*, (1976; Tamla).

² Sylvia Wynter, “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” *Forum H.H.I. Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (1994): pp. 42-73.

³ Stevie Wonder, “As,” recorded in 1974, track 3 on side four of *Songs in the Key of Life*, Tamla Records, 1976.

⁴ Bryan Wilhite, “The Greatest Love Song Ever / Stevie Wonder's Key of Life,” *The Liberator Magazine*, September 25, 2007.

the instruments. He often does with rhythm what other singers do with riffs and runs. The album's range of emotions and tones are as wide as the range of subjects. So, even though it does not have the polish one might expect of an album that took over two years to produce, *Songs* embodies the content and the craftsmanship to engender a richer sense of community.⁵

Though Stevie Wonder wrote and composed much of the album's material, he did not author the *Key*. Instead, he was merely attempting to gesture toward the place or thing we all come from - and must return to - and connect others to it. Some might call that "heaven," "the one," or even "order." Nonetheless, the process is communal. This album also epitomizes his life and his career because of his willingness to use his music for social criticism and to inspire social movements. Yet, Mr. Wonder and his voice are not exceptional in this sense. He's an exemplar of the musical and cultural traditions in which he was born. The same applies to Paul Robeson, Nina Simone, church soloists and singing preachers, SNCC Freedom Singers, and song leaders in other African American contexts. They all use(d) songs to channel the collective will of their communities and achieve various goals. Thinking about them in the longer arc of African cultural meaning-making, they resemble vocalists in Africana spiritual traditions whose voices also impact music and movement(s).⁶ Akpons are the Yoruba Lucumi form of these vocalists.

Live music is integral to all aspects of Lucumi practice. As song leaders during orisha drumming ceremonies, akpons direct the musical and social movements of their

⁵Vince Aletti, "Songs in the Key of Life," *The Rollingstone*, December 16, 1976.

⁶Greg Carr, "Teaching and Studying the African(a) Experience: Definitions and Categories," in *Lessons in Africana Studies*, ed. Greg Carr (Philadelphia, PA: Songhai Press and the School District of Philadelphia, 2006), pp. 12-20, 16.

communities. But despite their importance, most of the published work related to orisha music treats them as minor participants compared to the drums/drummers. This thesis will explore this gap in the Orisha Music subfield and outline the significance of akpons in the context of the Lucumi tradition.

Approach & Methodology

Intellectual work, as I approach it, is not merely the process of thinking about a subject; intellectual work requires engaging (in) it. And the commitment by Lucumi practitioners to carry on their way of life ritualistically and systematically means any serious investigation of their music must be on their terms. For this study, I use my perspective as a scholar-practitioner to analyze the existing literature and fill what I see as a gap in the subfield.⁷ The Yoruba Lucumi spiritual system is what Hampate Ba calls a living tradition.⁸ Their forms of inscription don't involve writing. So what practitioners embody and how they transmit ritual knowledge are vital for engaging the tradition. Focusing on the perspective of Insiders is additionally significant for stripping away any class, cultural or disciplinary impositions written or read in by academicians from outside of the target community. The mouth-to-ear transmission of knowledge is a central feature of the spiritual system. Yet, an understated part is being able to tap in - to hear, see and feel - in ways that go beyond normative sensory perception. That level of understanding

⁷ The presence of scholar-practitioners has benefitted the field because we have the knowledge and experiences to ask more penetrating sets of questions. Jacob O Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), xxiv.

⁸ A. Hampate Ba, "The Living Tradition," in *General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J Ki-Zerbo, vol. 1 (Berkeley, Ca: Heinemann/California/UNESCO, 1995), pp. 166-205.

and those experiences gained in that manner are difficult to assess through outside observation. They require intimate connections to the tradition.

Outsider, non-participant and/or etic approaches have their uses. However, I find emic approaches to be more generative regarding the subject itself. I'm a member of the aforementioned community and I (am studying to) perform the function that is being detailed and analyzed. So I bear witness to the topic at-hand, on a regular basis. Inserting a certain intent into the *performance*, engaging in the interplay with the drum(mer)s, participating in the call-and-response with the attendee-chorus, and taking part in the ritual drumming in general are all intimate yet informative first-hand experiences worth contributing. As a drummer, dancer, and Yoruba Lucumi practitioner, my relationship to this subject is essential for extending the work in the field in the way I outline in the following section.

Chapter Overview

Chapter II *Existing Scholarship and the Subfield* reviews the major texts that comprises the subfield of Orisha Music. One of the authors featured is not an academic yet has published numerous other texts on the Lucumi tradition and is often consulted by researchers writing on the subject. The end of the chapter offers an explanation of why the aforementioned gap in the subfield exists. "*If You Can Sing It, You Can Play It*": *The Bembe as Context* broadly introduces Lucumi as it is practiced in the U.S., gives an overview of the music, and discusses how the relationship between sacred and theatrical performances of the tradition. For the sake of brevity, some aspects of Lucumi practice, such as the use of orisha songs in other ritual spaces, are omitted. The goal here is to

illustrate the context in which akpons are situated and set up Chapter IV. *A Preliminary Analysis of Akpons at Work* begins with biographical information on a few akpons, then identifies what it is that akpons do during drumming ceremonies. “They sing” or “soloist” is an oversimplification of their role. A nuanced understanding of how, what, and why they sing specific songs inspires an appreciation of akpons and has implications for how people think about vocalists in Africana meaning-making traditions.

Preliminary Findings

Based on how they influence the music, dancing and possession during ceremonies, akpons are responsible for what I identify as *song-initiated movements*. These movements pull together the seen and unseen members of Lucumi communities. Movements within Lucumi ceremonies are representative of Africana social movements to restore (their senses of) goodness to the world, and to resist the forces which bring misfortune and cause goodness to be lost. Furthermore, this understanding of akpons and their roles in Orisha Music is an implicit critique of the particular conditions in which African people find themselves and the modern world system as a whole. Examining the reconfigurations of who is present and what presence entails, through singing, emboldens Orisha Music (and the contexts in which it is performed) as an entry point for studying the spiritual tradition. Elevating this oral and embodied mode of inscription is not meant to supplant texts as the predominant form of inscription consulted when engaging Africana traditions.⁹ Rather, it opens up what we can know and how we come to know.

⁹ For valid and invalid reasons, texts - oral and written - are the dominant source of knowledge about Yoruba-rooted spiritual traditions, particularly in the United States. Williams Bascom’s work and many who followed focused on folklore and the literary

CHAPTER 2 EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP AND THE SUBFIELD

Orisha Music is a growing subfield in the broader studies of “Yoruba-rooted” religions and Africana Religions.¹⁰ Roughly thirty years old, scholars in the field have been diligent, while leaving room for others to continue the work. Below is an extensive list of works that must be considered by all who wish to study the subfield. Any works that do fit this category but are not present will be integrated at a later date.

Literature Review

The Music of Santeria by John Amira and Steven Cornelius

Academic works on Ifa-Orisha Music are a more recent development in the U.S., compared to more generalized and/or orisha-specific approaches to the Yoruba religious tradition(s). *The Music of Santeria* (1992) by John Amira and Steven Cornelius briefly examines the historical background, instrumental ensemble, musical structure and

corpus as points of extracting knowledge about traditional Yoruba culture. This has severely limited some academic approaches to studying the spiritual tradition and its many manifestations in the African diaspora. See J. D. Y. Peel, “The Pastor and the Babalawo: The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland,” *Africa* 60, no. 3 (1990): pp. 338-369.

¹⁰ I borrow “Yoruba-rooted” to acknowledge the people and encompass the variations in orisha traditions across the Caribbean, North and South America, whose culture have a common origin in West Africa. “Modupúe: Ibaye,” Intercultural Journeys, accessed June 2019, <https://www.interculturaljourneys.org/Yorùbá>.

transcriptions of ritual drumming ceremonies.¹¹ It speaks most directly to musicians interested in broadening their repertoires and musicologists studying ritual performance, presenting a technical perspective on the music. Without using too much music theory jargon, it is useful for spiritual practitioners interested in learning more about the musical aspects of their tradition.¹² Given the shortage of citational material in the U.S., Amira and Cornelius reference the work of Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz, who was publishing his research on Yoruba/Lucumi people on the island from the early 1900's through the 1950's.¹³ They combine written sources with their own musical expertise. John Amira is a master percussionist who plays batá.

This book concentrates on the performance, side-stepping the religious or symbolic imperatives. It's most valuable contributions are the descriptions of how the music is situated within the ceremony and how the sections of the music fit together. The "relationships between the drums and their relationship with clave" are essential to batá rhythms.¹⁴ The authors underscore the interlocking conversation between the batá drums as the lifeline of the music. Each piece - the okonkolo (player), the itotele (player), the iya (player), the clave, and even the singer - fits together like a puzzle. That interplay is essential for summoning the Orisha to take hold of their children's earthly bodies.

The transcriptions and the accompanying analysis are admirable as well, transcribing salutes for more than twenty Orisha. Amira and Cornelius chose to depict

¹¹ John Amira and Steven Cornelius, *The Music of Santeria: Traditional Rhythms of the Batá Drums* (Crown Point, IN: White Cliffs Media Company, 1992).

¹² John Amira and Steven Cornelius, *The Music of Santeria: Traditional Rhythms of the Batá Drums* (Crown Point, IN: White Cliffs Media Company, 1992), 1.

¹³ Ortiz transitioned in 1969 but a number of his works were published posthumously.

¹⁴ Amira and Cornelius, *The Music of Santeria*, 24.

salutes in staff notation. One obvious drawback to this method is that the reader must know how to read it. However, staff notation is widely accessible. At the very least, they reinforce the irreplaceability of experienced batá players.

Orin Orisa (1992) and Ìróntí Apónni Méjì (2006) by John Mason

That same year (1992), John Mason published his Orisha song book. With its introductory commentary, informed by decades of experience and research, *Orin Orisa* is an unconventional yet valuable contribution to the study of Ifa-Orisha Music.¹⁵ Mason, a priest of Obatala, transcribed as many as 600 songs - typically sung in the Lucumi language - into Yoruba, then translated them into English.¹⁶ Each song's lyrics make allusions to a specific orisha's character traits, affinities and feats and other biographical information. Thus, Mason's translations support his descriptions of the orisha, located directly before the series of corresponding songs, adding depth and context to the reader's understanding of the divinities. He closes the seminal text with arrangements of the songs paired with music on staff notation to illustrate how they are sung.

Mason followed up on his first song book fourteen years later with *Ìróntí Apónni Méjì* (2006).¹⁷ It is based on transcriptions of songs recorded by Rodolfo Martin (1914-90) and Lazaro Ros (1925-2005) - two notable Akpons from Cuba.¹⁸ Similar to *Orin Orisa*, Mason transcribed and translated the lyrics into Yoruba and English, respectively.

¹⁵ John Mason, *Orin Orisa: Songs for Selected Heads*, (Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1997).

¹⁶ Lucumi, the language, is a creolized form of Yoruba that lacks changes in tone when spoken and diacritics when written.

¹⁷ John Mason, *Ìróntí Apónni Méjì: Remembrance of Two Flatterers* (Brooklyn, NY: Yorubá Theological Archministry, 2006).

¹⁸ Akpon is a derivative of Aponni in Yoruba.

The text begins with vital background information on the two song leaders. In those two and a half pages, he recounts both of their Orisha lineages.¹⁹ Martin was initiated to Obatala and was part of the San Jose-Ochenta lineage. He was also initiated to Ifa and kept a great deal of oral history on the Lucumi religion in Cuba. The more well-known Lazaro Ros was initiated to Ogun; and his work as an akpon was coupled with his work as an oriate.²⁰ Ros is more commonly remembered for his career singing with Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, the island's first performing arts company that showcases Afro-Cuban music, dance and folklore. As a result, a greater deal of information on and number of recordings of him are accessible, compared to Rodolfo Martin.

Drumming for the Gods by Maria Teresa Velez (2000)

In *Drumming for the Gods* (2000), Maria Teresa Velez uses Felipe Garcia Villamil's life as an Afro-Cuban musician and spiritual practitioner as a proxy for the history of his traditions and culture.²¹ She organized the text based on three periods in her teacher's life: his life before the Cuban revolution, during and after the revolution in Cuba, and his time in New York. The subsections of the work juxtapose particular aspects of Garcia Villamil's life - his engagement with Santería versus that of batá, Palo Monte and Abakua. It is impossible to neatly dissect the parts of one's world, as one inevitably bleeds into another. However, the subsections frame Velez's understanding of his practices as they are articulated in Villamil's musical and ritual lineages, rather than

¹⁹ John Mason, *Ìròntí Apónni Méjì: Remembrance of Two Flatterers* (Brooklyn, NY: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 2006), vi-viii.

²⁰ An oriate is an orisha priest who uses cowrie shells to divine.

²¹ María Teresa Vélez. *Drumming for the Gods: the Life and Times of Felipe García Villamil, Santero, Palero, and abakuá*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000.

over-represent them as the standards for his traditions - batá, Palo, Abakua, etc.²²

Illustrating them as particular instead of general offers readers the ability to recognize and appreciate the harmonic multiplicity of Afro-Cuban traditions. Case in point, Felipe Garcia Villamil was raised and acquired his trade in Matanzas, Cuba. The style of Orisha Music from that province noticeably differs from Havana style, which is more popular and widely known, in the U.S. and Cuba. Thus,

Vélez's final subsection, "Singing as a Way of Remembering," remains the most extensive treatment of singing within Lucumi religion, in book form. Here, she details how significant orisha songs are to her teacher and the role of ritual singers. Because his drum lineage is from Matanzas, and not Havana, Villamil was unable to replicate his level of success as a cultural worker in Cuba, after he arrived in New York. As a result, he did not access his well of ritual-musical knowledge as often. So singing and chanting helped him tap back into his traditions, leading him to reflect on where he came from and the institutions that made him who he is. Moreover, they are how he passes the tradition on to others.

Divine Utterances by Katherine Hagedorn (2001)

Concentrating on the connection between artistic and ritual performance of Lucumi, *Divine Utterances* is the product of research Hagedorn conducted across several trips to Cuba.²³ This ethnographic study compares the folkloric representations of Lucumi by Conjunto Folklórico Nacional to the religious ones she witnessed at ritual drummings.

²² Vélez, *Drumming for the Gods*, xix.

²³ Katherine J. Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances: the Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001)

She finds that embodiment spiritual tradition during Lucumi performances - at a ballet and/or a bembé - are sacred, and the only thing that differentiates them is the intent of those who are participating.²⁴ This thin line between theatre and religion animates the work. Many of the audience members at the ensemble's performances she attended practiced Santería. Others did not. What kept the folkloric display from drifting in the direction of spiritual ceremony was the lack of collective desire of attendees, dancers, and musicians alike to fellowship directly with the orishas.

Another pressing theme or subplot in the book is the transformation of Hagedorn's own intent: she went from an outside observer, to a participant-insider. Only after studying the tradition for almost a decade did she decide to receive initiation. The relationships she cultivated and the experiences she acquired during her time in Havana inevitably drew her into Santería's embrace. Wedged in this arc is her existence as a middle-class, white woman from America. She visibly recognized the racial and class discrimination her Afro-Cuban friends and interviewees experienced in contrast to how she was treated. That dynamic compelled her to support them in any way she could.²⁵

Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá by Carlos Aldama and Umi Vaughan (2012)

As opposed to the blurry lines between the voice of the teachers (drummer) and the student (researcher), *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá* clearly delineates co-authorship, allowing the primary source to speak for himself.²⁶ It is Carlos Aldama's autobiography, detailing his life in Cuba and experience as a master drummer. Aldama is a world-

²⁴ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 6.

²⁵ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 24-28.

²⁶ Carlos Aldama and Umi Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá: Cuba, Diaspora, and the Drum*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).

renowned batá player from Havana and a founding member of Conjunto Folklórico Nacional. It has the added benefit of being a history of Lucumi people in Cuba and the tradition that holds them together. Umi Vaughan, responsible for this history, is an anthropologist who met Aldama while growing up in the Bay Area of California. He blends his academic research with the knowledge obtained during his apprenticeship to construct the historical framework around which Aldama's life story and tradition are inserted. Aldama's reflection on the development of the Afro-Cuban and Lucumi identities is evidence of the inseparability of history and culture.

A significant feature of this book is the discussion of *fundamento*. It is described as "the root of Lucumí identity, which first developed in nineteenth-century Cuba. It has inherent power, which is passed down from generation to generation through various ritual objects, social organizations, and activities."²⁷ It is the essence of who they were prior to enslavement and who they became in the diaspora. Fundamento is what distinguishes consecrated batá drums from unconsecrated batá. Batá *de fundamento* can effectively summon orisha to possess initiates because they literally embody the foundation of what it means to be Lucumi - the people and the spiritual system.²⁸ Fundamento may additionally be thought of as the spirit (or even ashe) which enables practitioners - musicians and ceremony participants - to be vessels for their tradition.

The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming by Kenneth Schweitzer (2016)

Kenneth Schweitzer's *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming* is likely the first book-length treatise on the Lucumi batá drumming tradition published in the United

²⁷ Aldama and Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá* 16.

²⁸ Aldama and Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá*, 19.

States.²⁹ The process of change for the toques mirrors that vitality of the Aña fraternity. Schweitzer notes that due to “the loss of the social cohesion inherent in the Ayan-kinship-lineage configuration of Yorubaland, members of the Aña fraternity in Cuba have employed a variety of strategies to establish and maintain their cohesiveness as a socioreligious entity.”³⁰ Aña is an orisha just the others. But the society and lineages of drummers are apart from orisha houses and lineages. So, when they convene, it is to execute the work they were initiated to do - induct new members, consecrate new batá, maintain the drums, and perform at ceremonies.³¹ They do; they learn. This is one of the dynamics Omo Aña have in common with Olorisha.

Schweitzer’s analysis in Chapters 6 (Traditional Ñongo) and 7 (Modern Ñongo) may be applicable as a theoretical framework for other music traditions. Building on the work of Amira and Cornelius, he charts the toque’s evolution in Havana using staff notation. “Not bound to a specific chant, song, or orisha,” Ñongo’s “extensive use and generic qualities encourage a creative fluidity that often leads to substantial musical innovation.”³² The political and economic climate in Cuba shifted in the 1960s and again in the 1980s. So the toque had to change, in part, because the people had to change. What remained was its organizing principle - the clave.³³ Though adapting and innovating,

²⁹ Kenneth Schweitzer, *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming: Aesthetics, Transmission, Bonding, and Creativity* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).

³⁰ Schweitzer, *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming*, 50.

³¹ Schweitzer, *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming*, 50-51.

³² Schweitzer, *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming*, 143.

³³ Schweitzer, *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming*, 165.

Schweitzer demonstrates that the foundation of what/who they (the people and the toque) were and are endures.

A Gap In The Subfield

As the previous section demonstrates, in a tradition which employs singing wherever two or more practitioners are gathered, drumming and drummers have garnered the lion's share of attention within the academic study of Orisha Music. The existing body of knowledge regarding the function of orisha music or its intricacies are consistent. All seven books even include records to enhance the reader's learning experience.

There are, however, two major gaps in the study of Orisha Music. The books reviewed above briefly touch on the Orisha of the drum, Àyàn (Yoruba) or Añá (Lucumi).³⁴ Amanda Villepastour's work *The Yoruba God of Drumming* may be the only book-length text on the subject. She makes a critical contribution to the study. But her work is an edited volume of essays by musicians, priests and academicians. There is no book that expands on Añá in/with a single voice. Likewise, the Akpon is another aspect of Orisha Music that is worthy of further research. These gaps present opportunities or new directions to take within the study.

There are a few potential explanations for this gap. During the actual performance of Orisha Music, drummers often fulfill dual roles as Akpons, switching back and forth between playing and singing. Drummers are contracted out as a group, which do not feature song specialists. In the case of Añá groups, only those initiated to the orisha of the

³⁴ Amira and Cornelius, *The Music of Santeria*, 123-124; Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 91. Aldama and Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá*, 19; Schweitzer, *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming*, 23.

drum can be a member and that membership is not a prerequisite for being an Akpon. Therefore, Akpons are hired separately for gigs, if at all. A second potential explanation is underestimating what Akpons do as “just singing” songs that everyone knows. From that perspective, the role may seem pedestrian and easily replicable compared to what the drummers do. Another possible reason for the gap is the non-proximity of Akpons to academic knowledge producing spaces. The reviewed works were all made possible through the reliance on highly skilled drummers and practitioners, two of which featured master drummers as co-authors (John Amira and Carlos Aldama). With the exception of maybe Mason, all of the authors have received some degree of instruction in playing batá, with Vaughan and Schweitzer becoming initiates to the drum over the course of their studies. These dynamics do not exist with respect to Akpon and academic knowledge production. The fourth and final potential explanation for the gap is the Lucumi language itself. It is used in songs, prayers, and to identify objects in the spiritual tradition, but practitioners are not able to use it conversationally. This dynamic will be explored in future research. Nevertheless, ritual knowledge and experience are major factors in the extent to which practitioners do understand the language and are able to deploy it with intent. However, the general capacity to understand the Lucumi language is not high enough to translate the songs and categorize them. Any one of these factors is not enough to explain the gap fully. So it is likely caused by a combination of them all and maybe more.

CHAPTER 3

“IF YOU CAN SING IT, YOU CAN PLAY IT”: THE BEMBE AS CONTEXT

“Praise is the way we say thanks” J. Moss³⁵

“This is a chance to dance your way out of constriction” Funkadelic³⁶

Overview Of The Yoruba Lucumi Tradition

The transatlantic slave trade forcibly removed millions of people from Africa, but it could not remove Africa from within them. They were scattered across Europe, the U.S., the Caribbean and South America, where they would reassemble the pieces of themselves in spite of their colonial conditions. Yoruba people from modern day Nigeria and Benin were taken in large concentrations to the Caribbean and Brazil. Lucumi, also known as Santeria or Regla de Ocha, is the “Ifa” spiritual tradition that Yoruba people reconstituted in Cuba, under the cloak of Catholicism in the 19th and 20th centuries. When their Afro-Cuban descendants arrived in the U.S. throughout the 1900s, their spiritual system came with them. Now, many African Americans distinguish their de-syncretized orisha worship as Yoruba Lucumi.

In Lucumi, the Supreme Being - Olodumare - is too vast for humans to engage with directly or represent in any singular form. So the orisha function as benevolent emissaries and manifestations of Olodumare witnessed in natural phenomena. Gary Edwards and John Mason loosely translate Olodumare as “God”, yet put forth a

³⁵ J. Moss, “Praise on the Inside,” released April 2007, track 7 on V2, Gospo Centric Records, compact disc.

³⁶ Funkadelic, “One Nation Under a Groove”, recorded in 1978, track 1 on *One Nation Under a Groove*, United Sound.

thoughtful understanding of orisha in the context of Yoruba Lucumi practice. “[W]hen a Yoruba goes to a river and gives an offering of fruit to it, he is not worshipping the river; he is making an offering to the spirit of the river, the orisa of the river, that small part of God which the river exemplifies.”³⁷ Aspects of nature anchor orisha to the material world, allowing humans to bear witness to and commune with them. Therefore, the concept of spirits as immaterial, spiritual beings who possess the potential to be tangibly present is built into the Lucumi understanding of orisha.

The qualities of the more-than-200 orisha are as varied as that of one river compared to another or a river compared to a mountain. Knowledge of these character traits and iconography emerge out of the collective Yoruba memory and their relationships with the orisha, which give rise to archetypes for each of these divine figures. The Odu Ifa - the Yoruba literary corpus and sacred oral text - is the most systematic form of that collective memory. It contains the history and values of Yoruba people in the form of mythology that includes the orisha.

One of the foundational orisha in the pantheon is Eshu-Elegba, “the guardian of the crossroads” and “keeper of ashe” (vital force/the ability to make things happen).³⁸ The crossroads represent the everyday choices we all have to make, the moments that are pregnant with possibilities of which we are only able to choose one. This is where Eshu lives. His playful, yet mischievous behavior and trickster-persona are emblematic of the unpredictability or even uncontrollable outcomes of our decisions. And because he stands

³⁷ Gary Edwards and John Mason, *Black Gods--Òrìṣà Studies in the New World*, Fourth (Brooklyn, NY: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 1998), 4.

³⁸ Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 13.

at the intersections of life, he must be appeased if we want the outcomes of our choices to be in our favor. Eshu unselfishly takes from every sacrifice orisha devotees make, even when they are not specifically for him, so he may maintain balance in the world by *paying off* other spirits who may be affected by our actions. These are the principles being animated when Eshu possesses one of his children.

Although the Odu Ifa or Pataki may be the most extensive sources for information, it is not accessed the same way Muslims study the Quran or Buddhists learn the Four Noble Truths. The Lucumi Ile-structure, often undergirded by natal family ties, supports a more personalized practice for worshippers because they feature godparents. This structure imitates the (nuclear) family structure where one's godparents are guru-like figures, directly responsible for one's spiritual development.³⁹ Being an Olorisha entails having the power (ashe) and authority to work on behalf of the Orisha. Godparents oversee any divinations, offerings, initiations, and other work that their godchildren may need to receive or perform. Likewise, godchildren work with their parents, and occasionally others in their direct lineage, almost exclusively.

Another aspect of Lucumi practice is the absence of community-owned shrines. From the Warriors Ceremony on forward, children of Orisha work with their own shrines that are tuned into their individual destinies. When you feed or make an offering to Ogun, you go to your Ogun pot. If you don't have Ogun, you feed your god-father/-mother's.

³⁹ Steven T Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 22-74, 44.

There are no shrines that an ile collectively makes an offering to on a recurring basis. This is another effect of colonialism on African spiritual traditions.

Rituals and ceremonies within these kinship networks are relatively self-contained. Because Lucumi is an oral tradition, divinations, offerings, initiations and drumming events are also the sites where/when ritual knowledge is transmitted most often. Drumming ceremonies in particular are the events where practitioners gain their first-hand religious experiences of what orisha possessions look like. Religious experiences occur in the context of the three other rituals. Drumming ceremonies are just the only ones when orisha are present in such a conspicuous manner. These governance structures and the experiences that ile cultivate for their members generate one's preconditioning within Lucumi spiritual practice.⁴⁰ Each type of ceremony is informed by the others. The ritual knowledge practitioners wield and the sacred rites they have undergone are part and parcel of what transpires at drumming ceremonies, specifically, and how those moments are interpreted.

The Music

Orisha Music is mainly played on a set of batá and a bell. In other situations, a conga and three beaded gourds or other combinations of instruments are played in to facilitate drumming events. The batá set consists of three double-sided drums. The bigger side of each batá is the "enu" and the smaller side is the "chacha." The iya is the largest, has the lowest pitch, and initiates the *conversation* the other two drums. Wrapped around each end of the Iya are bells referred to as the tchaworo. They ring out every time one of

⁴⁰ Carr, "Teaching and Studying the African(a) Experience," 14.

the iya's heads is slapped. Itotele is the middle size and pitch, yet sits to the iya player's left. And, as the smallest and highest pitched, the okonkolo keeps time.⁴¹ When the three parts are in-sync, they create a "lock" that is animated by the clave.

Essential to AfroCuban music, the clave pattern has five beats spread across two measures - two beats in one measure and three in the other. As the pattern is repeated, an alternation from one polarity to the other takes place creating pulse and rhythmic drive....In batá drumming the patterns [that each musician plays] are held in place according to both the internal relationships between the drums and their relationship with clave."⁴²

Guiro is another style of Orisha Music. Here, shekeres combined with a conga facilitate the music.⁴³ Similar to batá, the three shekere rhythms and the conga revolve around the clave. What differentiates Guiro from batá, besides the instruments, is that a Guiro consists of one generic, syncopated rhythm used for all of the orisha, while batá ensembles have a plethora, with some rhythms unique to specific orisha.

The orisha song repertoire is more expansive than the rhythms are. Each orisha has his or her own songs. Tratados are the sequences of songs sung together according to the drum rhythm, tempo and the situation during the event. "Songs change and rhythms shift to accommodate emerging circumstances."⁴⁴ So even though one rhythm is played for an entire Guiro, the tratados stay the same as they are during an Añá.⁴⁵ Songs within a

⁴¹ Amira and Cornelius, *The Music of Santería*, 15.

⁴² Amira and Cornelius, *The Music of Santería*, 22-23.

⁴³ Shekeres are hollowed gourds, wrapped in beads.

⁴⁴ Aldama and Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá*, 22.

⁴⁵ It's worth noting that not all songs sung at Añás are sung at Guiros. There's a large overlap but some are unique to the form of the drumming.

tratado may vary based on their relationship to the clave. Some are sung on the side two beats; some are sung on the side with three beats. There are five types of songs: praise songs; rezos, sung prayers; syllabic songs detailing stories and attributes about the orisha; puyas, sung to shame or goad orisha into possessing; and cierres, closing songs.⁴⁶ As their labels suggest, it is the drumming ceremony itself that gives significance to these context-dependant categories. In ritual settings, participants sing in unison.⁴⁷ This is the general case for folklore performances too, however some groups do harmonize while singing orisha songs.

The Ritual

When Yoruba Lucumi brothers and sisters sing and dance together, the bodies of men and women become that of *spirits*. Drumming, singing, and dancing are essential to the spiritual transformation. And while the ritual might be festive, it is not a celebration. Their worship is their work. “The Yoruba believe that mankind can commune with God through the vehicle of trance-possession.”⁴⁸ This is when their deities enter into and control the bodies of their devotees. God does not always look the same in Yoruba Lucumi because each orisha is associated with forces of nature, such as the wind, the volcano, the ocean, the river, or the sun and moon.⁴⁹ And ever-so-often, one will use a devotee as a host to join in on the worship.

⁴⁶ Javier Diaz, “Meaning Beyond Words: A Musical Analysis of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming” (PhD diss, CUNY, 2019), 25-28.

⁴⁷ Peter Manuel and Orlando Fiol, "Mode, Melody, and Harmony in Traditional Afro-Cuban Music: From Africa to Cuba," *Black Music Research Journal* 27, no. 1 (Spring, 2007):45-75, 62.

⁴⁸ Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 4.

⁴⁹ Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*.

Although people experience possession as individuals, the process is a collective effort. Drumming ceremonies, where possession takes place, are communal events. At what are generally known as “bembes”, “wemileres,” or “tambors,” the attendees participate in the event by dancing to the coordinated rhythms and responding with the appropriate lyrics to the song leader. “The main goal of these rhythms, songs, and dances is to summon (or goad) the [orisha] to earth, so that the deities may soothe those who are grieving, heal those who are sick, rebuke those who have acted unwisely, bless those who appear to be deserving, and set the tone for the next few weeks or months for the community.”⁵⁰ A bembe is not akin to a concert where religious musicians perform for an audience of like-minded believers. It is a ritual for orisha devotees; their singing and dancing work to achieve specific aims for the community.

Bembes are officially held for one of about four reasons: To honor (the orisha of) one’s godparent or an elder in the community, to announce a newly initiated priest, to appease an orisha as part of a sacrifice, or to celebrate an orisha’s sacred day.⁵¹ No matter the specific occasion for a bembe or how festive the mood is, this limited range reinforces the idea that these events are part of the spiritual work that practitioners perform for themselves and one another.

There are two forms of batá - fundamento and aberikula. They may be physically identical, but the difference is Añá. Fundamento drums are dedicated to and ritually blessed with ashe of Añá, the orisha of drumming. “According to Cuban Añá tradition,

⁵⁰ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 76.

⁵¹ Aldama and Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama’s Life in Batá*, 22-23 & 37-39. Also see Amira and Cornelius, 21-22.

sacred batá must be *born* from a previously consecrated set of drums.⁵² This is how the ‘voice’ of Añá is transmitted, allowing a new set of batá to talk to the oricha.”⁵³ Batá fundamento are the kind played for ceremonies and *talking* is their musical contribution to the possession. These drums are so significant that their presence alters the structure of the ceremony. Therefore, a bembé featuring batá fundamento is called an “Añá.”

Drumming, singing and dancing are how practitioners call on the orisha. So the musicians are the cornerstones of the bembé. They are likewise the only participants present who explicitly rehearse, prior to attending, and/or have a script for the ceremony. There is even an order for which each orisha is played and sung too. There is room for improvisation too, but work of ritual musicians is highly structured. Bembés have two major components or phases. The first is the oro igbodu, when batá are present and the drums salute the throne or altar room, where the shrines or physical representations of the orisha are present. There is no singing or dancing yet; consequently it is referred to as the oro seco (“dry” in Spanish). The second is the oro cantado. This is when the akpon and the participant-chorus join in the collective work of calling *down* the orisha to possess their devotees and commence with the communal healing.

In a similar fashion to Añás, Guiro corresponds to the type of drumming ceremony in the Lucumi tradition where shekeres and congas are played. The structure of the ceremony is reduced in comparison to when batá are played; and the music serves the

⁵² Batá fundamento or “consecrated batá” are instruments and shrines. For more details on how these drums are born, see Aldama and Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama’s Life in Batá*, 28-30.

⁵³ Aldama and Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama’s Life in Batá*, 19.

same function: “calling the orisha to mount their priests.”⁵⁴ Because the orisha of the drum is not there in the form of batá fundamento, new initiates cannot be presented to the drum, confirming their places as priests in the spiritual tradition. This discussion of form and presence of drums affirms the centrality of music during the ceremony and in Lucumi at-large.

The other participants are organized around or oriented to the musicians. Every orisha is associated with movements and gestures based on their archetype. As the song leader and drummers invoke Eshu musically, priests initiated to Eshu move to the front and lead the attendees in one of “nine codified dances.”⁵⁵ Each “dance” entails a variety of movements, gestures and postures. For instance, movements for Ogun, the orisha of iron, correspond to swinging a machete with a slight forward lean. Dancing for the orisha of weather, Oya, involves twirling the wrists and arms to symbolize a tornado or the wind. In these spaces, orisha worshippers use their ritual knowledge and collective memory to call on the divine mothers and fathers. Daniel emphasizes the importance of movement when she states that bembes as “dance-dependent ritual structures with dance-initiating objectives.”⁵⁶ During this interplay is when the orisha begin to show up.

When orisha possess their priests, the spirits exemplified in nature take human forms. The associative movements cease to be representations and priests become the archetypes that worshippers mimic. Upon arrival, the orisha does not explicitly announce

⁵⁴ Aldama and Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá*, 37.

⁵⁵ Daniel refers to the dances for Eshu, Ogun, Ochoosi, Obatala, Aganju, Shango, Oya, Yemaya, and Oshun. However, there are also dances or steps for Babaluaye. Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yorùbá, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 15-16.

⁵⁶ Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 4.

him-/herself, e.g. “I am Yemaya!” It is incumbent on the body of practitioners to recognize who has just come to commune with them and enact the necessary protocol. The trope of Eshu-Elegba being a trickster becomes plain speech. At a drumming ceremony Katherine Hagedorn attended in 1997, during her fieldwork in Cuba, Eshu was up to his typical antics. After greeting the drummers - a customary gesture when an orisha arrives - he took all the hats he could find that people were wearing and danced with them on his head, illustrating his playful, trickster persona. Furthermore, possessing-orisha make their presence known by engaging members of the community one on one. Devotees likewise salute the deity. And the deities give encouragement, wise-counsel and/or scoldings to aid the community’s development amidst these interactions. Along these lines, the presence of orisha and the bembé as a whole are a ritual performance enacted as a source of healing for orisha worshippers.

The Stage

Drumming ceremonies don’t simply constitute sacred time and space for Lucumi practitioners. The rituals are also moments where/when their cultural identity is forged and hardened according to who practitioners are to each other - inside and outside of those moments. Every time orisha devotees convene to drum, sing and dance together, they tap into the collective memory of the other times they came together.⁵⁷ Cuba completed its revolution, the government attempted to fold peoples’ cultural identities,

⁵⁷ See George Brandon’s discussion of the types of memory in *Santeria from Africa to the New World*, (1997).

like Lucumi, into a broader Cuban national identity. This is most evident in the formation of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba.

Founded in 1962, the island's official AfroCuban performing arts troupe folklorized the cultural and spiritual traditions of the formerly enslaved Africans, based on the *nations* they are organized into - Lucumi, Abakua, Mandinga, Congo, Arara, Ganga, Mina, Carabalis and Macauas.⁵⁸ Interpretations of Lucumi culture presented portrayals of orisha and music performed at bembes. Storylines went as far as dramatizing stories about the orisha from the Odu Ifa and Patakis. Because the forms were not institutionalized in universities yet, the company's first musicians and dancers were practitioners. Their codified steps and rhythms were adapted to theatrical performances, even down to the instrumentation. The company's choreography and the stories they displayed came directly out of the culture.

Bata music is a staple of many African drum and dance ensembles in Cuba and the United States. Because the intentions of the performances are set on entertainment rather than ritual, aberikula are used. Because the unblessed or unconsecrated batá are physically identical to the fundamento ones, drummers can and often do play the same repertoire of rhythms. The guiro style of Orisha Music is included in the enterprise. Likewise, the tratados sung at drummings are employed on-stage too, minus the puyas. However, improvisation is restricted in order for the music to be in sync with the choreography and storytelling. The international popularity and commercial success of

⁵⁸ For more details on Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, see Katherine Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*.

Conjunto Nacional and other ensembles extends into recordings of their music. Today, recordings can be found on all major streaming platforms.

CHAPTER 4 A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF AKPONS AT WORK

“Change your words into truth and then change that truth in to love” Stevie Wonder⁵⁹

Exemplars

Some Akpons in the U.S. and Cuba are members of batá ensembles who happen to lead the songs. Many others are specialists and/or are renowned for their singing. No rule or policy dictates who can or cannot sing during ceremonies. Women do fill this vital role as well. Akpons are more commonly male, due to the kind of timbre best equipped to cut-through the drumming and the fraternal nature of batá and guiro ensembles.⁶⁰

Notwithstanding this gender dynamic, these Akpons are notable because of who they are to their communities, a factor which some have channeled into external pursuits.

Lazaro Ros (1925-2005) is probably the most recognizable Akpon.⁶¹ Ros was a priest of Ogun and oriate from Havana, Cuba. Gloria Rolando documents his life in her 1991 film *Oggun: An Eternal Presence*.⁶² In it, she argues that the work of an Akpon is

⁵⁹ Stevie Wonder, “As,” recorded in 1974, track 3 on side four of *Songs in the Key of Life*, Tamla Records, 1976.

⁶⁰ Villepastour acknowledges the significance of timbre and Añá being a brotherhood in describing the gender dynamic of Akpons, but problematizes the asymmetry and an inequality in her effort to elevate her subject. Amanda Villepastour, “Amelia Pedroso: The Voice of a Cuban Priestess Leading from the Inside,” in *Women Singers in Global Contexts: Music, Biography, Identity*, ed. Ruth Hellier (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 62.

⁶¹ His last name is also spelled “Ross” in some sources.

⁶² Felipe Alfonso is another akpon who can be seen and heard singing in the documentary. Gloria Rolando, *Oggun: An Eternal Presence*, directed by Gloria Rolando (1991; Cuba), DVD.

an oral tradition which “reflects a communal history” due to how the ritual singers draw on the words of those who came before them.⁶³ His international popularity stems from being a founding member and singing lead with Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba. From there he recorded several albums, collaborating with a number of artists from different genres.

Rodolfo Martín (1914-1990) was a priest of the Obatalá from the San José-Ochenta lineage. He was also initiated to Ifá and kept a great deal of oral history on the Lucumí religion. Not as much is available in the U.S. on Martín because he did not travel extensively or leave behind a vast music catalog like Ros did. However, based on John Mason gathered during his 1988 interview with Martín, one can infer that he was a master of craft and a pillar in the Havana Lucumí community. Martín initiated Santiago Pedroso; Pedroso initiated Orlando “Puntilla” Ríos.⁶⁴ From the time he immigrated to the U.S. in 1981 with his godfather, Puntilla helped advance Lucumí practice in New York and New Jersey, Miami, Puerto Rico and other areas where orisha needed to be venerated.⁶⁵ His influence can still be felt because he traveled the country playing for new initiates and he trained a generation of batá drummers along the way. And there is no doubt that Puntilla was able to do all of this because of his spiritual lineage. Far from an

⁶³ Haseenah Ebrahim, “Afrocuban Religions in Sara Gómez's ‘One Way Or Another’ and Gloria Rolando's ‘Ogun,’” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 22, no. 4 (1998): pp. 239-251, 245.

⁶⁴ John Mason, *Ìròntí Apònni Méjì*, vi-vii.

⁶⁵ Marta Moreno Vega, “The Yoruba Orisha Tradition Comes to New York City,” *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (1995): pp. 201-206, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042291>, 204.

exceptional individual, Rodolfo Martin was part of a ritual-musical genealogy that reverberated across the Yoruba diaspora.

Amelia Pedroso (1946-2000) is a celebrated-yet-divisive figure in the realm of Orisha Music. She was initiated from a young age and learned to sing from her uncle and grandmother. Pedroso went on to be highly regarded for her ritual work.⁶⁶ While the Yemoja priest was heralded for her singing and ritual virtuosity, she caused controversy by forming an all-women's batá ensemble and touring the U.S. and Europe.⁶⁷ Regardless of how people feel about her drumming, her prowess as a singer was undeniable, leading to commercial success. Pedroso recorded with Grupo Ilu Añá and Emilio Barreto; toured internationally with Lazaro Ros and her own group, Ibbu Okun; and performed with all-the-above, in addition to Clave y Guaguanco and two folklore companies.⁶⁸

Lazaro Galarraga, Lazaro Pedroso, Felix Oviedo, Olympia Alfaro, Jorge Iturralde and Miguel "Willie" Ramos are other notable akpons who've made an impact in Cuba and/or the United States.⁶⁹ Bembesito, a younger akpon from Dominican Republic, is a mainstay in the Northeast. As African Americans have cultivated Lucumi tradition in their communities, ritual singers have emerged from within their ranks. And despite the predominance of men in Orisha Music, four of the most significant African American

⁶⁶ "Amelia Pedroso," AfroCuba Web, 1997, <https://www.afrocubaweb.com/ameliapedroso.htm>.

⁶⁷ Amanda Villepastour, "Amelia Pedroso: The Voice of a Cuban Priestess Leading from the Inside," in *Women Singers in Global Contexts: Music, Biography, Identity*, ed. Ruth Hellier (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), pp. 54-72.

⁶⁸ Amanda Villepastour, "Amelia Pedroso," 56.

⁶⁹ Vickey Jassey compiled short biographies and/or interviews of these akpons can be for her project focusing on orisha music in Miami, FL. "Oricha Singers," The Bearers of Sacred Sound, n.d., http://thebearersofsacredsound.weebly.com/oricha_singers.html.

Akpons on the East coast are women. Amma McKen, Amma Oloriwa, Ola DeJean, and Olufemi Dewitt are stalwarts who've contributed to their ritual communities through song and by other means for more than four decades. As more work is published on Orisha Music in the U.S., I hope their names are lifted up as exemplars of their traditions as a whole.

Although Akpons play a unique role, they are not isolated. They are usually tapped into the tradition as godparents and godchildren, siblings, memory keepers, diviners, oriates, other types of specialists and/or cultural workers too. Those relationships sustain the community. In turn, they inform how and what the Akpon sings about. The moments standing beside the drums and in-front of their dancing chorus are then watershed moments that ritual knowledge and experiences flow in and out of.

Akpons at Work

With the exception of *Drumming for the Gods*, the monographs on Orisha Music only make passing descriptions of orisha song leaders.⁷⁰ This evidences a gap in the subfield due to how central Akpons are to how Lucumi practitioners actualize unity in their practice. They officiate ritual healing and engender community during drumming ceremonies. Due to government sponsored surveillance of and violence against African religious practitioners, Iles/Lucumi houses in Cuba and other parts of the diaspora rarely include permanent, brick-and-mortar temples. They don't have churches to go to for every bembé or mosque to use on Orisha feast days, which can occur on any day of the

⁷⁰ Amira and Cornelius, *Music of Santeria*, 21; Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 3; Mason, *Orin Orisa*, 7-8 & 27; Aldama and Vaughan, *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá*, 23; Schweitzer, *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming*, 23.

week. Their temples are assembled as needed, in the homes of their members and at community centers. They are wherever and whenever embodied knowledge and the sacred objects are present. Literally where (and when) two or more gather. Unfortunately, they disassemble when the Lucumi practitioners go their separate ways.

Therefore, Akpons help communities, who once communed more frequently and lived in closer proximity in previous generations, reconnect their scattered parts. Iles are family-like, but members are dispersed over large geographic regions. These dynamics directly influence how and when ile members convene. Correspondingly, they are the challenges that Akpons in conjunction with the other musicians help mitigate. The singing reaffirms the community's governance structure. Starting a rezos or praise song for a particular orisha signals priests of that orisha to move to the front of the room and invoke their sacred mother or father through dance. He/she forges the connection between the throne, the worshippers, and the drummers through song. There lies the source of the healing. As the one calls, the others respond. One drum (Iya) to the others (itotele and okonkolo); one selected head to another. When the Akpon calls, the omo olorin/akolu ("chorus composed of everyone in the house") answers through song and drummers answer through the toque.⁷¹ The orisha answer to a combination of it all through possession. This is why it is so crucial for everyone present to be tapped in.

The singer is neither a charismatic leader; nor is he or she necessarily exceptional. His/her voice doesn't have to be the most beautiful. It is not even the Akpon's singing that "brings down the Ocha." Many of the practitioners know the song lyrics just as well

⁷¹ Mason, *Orin Orisa*, 27.

as the Akpon. In fact, it's in everyone's best interest that they do. He/she uses song, social queues, and ritual knowledge to syncopate the community's focus and intentions into a collective voice (purpose). That's what Akpons do.

All of the songs for Orisha involve call-and-response (C&R). Sometimes the response is a repeat of the call; other times it isn't. Nevertheless, the Akpon uses his/her knowledge of the musical canon to guide the bembé toward its intended destination. Akpons are also conductors of sorts, especially when batás are played. Ensembles of drummers facilitate the music that everyone else is singing and dancing to, and that the Orisha are enticed by. The rhythms they play directly correlate to what lyrics are sung and which Orisha is being *flattered*.

Akpons use their voices/ to signal to the lead/Iya drummer which song to play or switch to. The lead/Iya drummer then plays a specific call for the other two drum(mer)s, signaling them to change to the corresponding rhythm. This dynamic illustrates an interplay between the Akpon and the drummers. The exchanges between the Akpon, the drummers, and the congregation give additional credence to the description of the Akpon as a song leader, rather than as a soloist. Soloists showcase their skill through how beautifully they sing - how they hit notes, manipulate their voices, execute riffs & runs, etc. All the while, the choir or background singers and the musicians support the soloist's effort by laying the foundations of lyrics and notes. There's an aspect of entertainment present, as the soloist is elevated. There's an inherent entertainment value to Orisha Music. However, the priority is executing the conversation between the drums and the interplay between the singing and drumming.

More precisely, one's skill as an Akpon is evidenced through changes in tempo, manipulation of clave, and deployment of puyas. These are song-initiated movements which influence the music and the event in which he/she is performing. Javier Diaz's focus is on the music emanating from the drums, yet his illustration of a sequence for the orisha Yemoja captures the execution of the first two techniques.⁷² In his scene, a slow rhythm begins the series for Yemoja, followed by two medium rhythms. The switch from the first medium to the second is marked by the change in relationship to where the "one" falls in the clave. Changing the location of this first note changes the "feel" of the music, building the anticipation for the orisha's arrival.⁷³ As this is going on, a priest of the particular orisha is dancing in front of the drums with the corresponding movements. Eventually, the Akpon switches to a faster rhythm, thus instigating the dancer's transformation into Yemoja.

Instigating possession during drummings is not quite reducible to this tempo-feel-change formula. For whatever reason, an orisha may have to be provoked into possessing one of his or her devotees. This is when puyas are deployed. As soon as this is done successfully, slower praise songs are sung as a sort of apology for the taunting in the previous song. This demonstrates that more than anything, Akpons use their ashe to speak to the ashe of the orisha they are attempting to summon. The other techniques are only tools to aid them in that process.

When the Akpon sang, the chorus and drummers followed. When the drummers played, the chorus also danced. Only when the songs, music and dancing/dancers were

⁷² Javier Diaz, "Meaning Beyond Words," 126-128.

⁷³ Javier Diaz, "Meaning Beyond Words," 127.

in-tune with one another did the Orisha rise up (Dide!)⁷⁴. These types of calculations are very intentional and paramount. The Orisha who *mount* their initiates further acknowledge intercommunal relationships by conforming to the community's protocol. First, the orisha prostrates before the throne/Ocha, the godparents of the person who they're possessing and the senior Olorisha present. Next, as devotees come to salute, they *raise* them from the floor and give words of wisdom, guidance, and/or correction according to what an individual needs to hear. These sets of interaction reinforce the values of the community that has just re-membered itself through song and dance.

Implications and New Directions

An understanding of what Akpons do every bembe has implications that extend beyond the walls of wherever the event is being held. For one, how and what they sing is a treatise on (or reflection of) how Yoruba-rooted practitioners order the cosmos. As stated earlier, Olodumare is the unifying principle and "source" in Lucumi. Olodumare is also relatively removed from the affairs of humans. So even if "Olofi" or "Olorun" is uttered during a song to refer to Olodumarè, it is not meant to invoke Olodumare directly.⁷⁵ But even without being sung for, the Creator is still present because the orisha emanate from that source. With Olodumarè on-the-one, every note supports the note before and after it. And although there is a designated beginning, the whole rhythm exists as an *idea* before any specific note within the time signature is played. So Olodumare *is*

⁷⁴ "Dide" is Yoruba for "Rise" or "Get up." In one particular song for the orisha Obatala, the lyrics petition him to "rise up" and help the petitioners as he has helped before.

⁷⁵ Olofi(n) and Olorun are other names for Olodumare.

(in) the rhythm, whose notes are interdependent and endure across musical time and space. Every *tratado* pays homage to Olofi because the orisha are extensions of Olofi.

Akpons sing-down multiple expressions of the source by reaching out to it, while also tapping into what's already in themselves, leading to robust questions about monotheism, polytheism and Lucumi's relationship to them. How does the ability to, not only invoke orisha but also, induce possession affirm or trouble the tradition of skepticism embedded in monotheistic religions? Does not calling on Olodumare specifically flatten the perceived hierarchy among divinities? As evidenced by orisha-archetypes and their behaviors while they possess their devotees, conceptualizations of orisha as manifestations of Olodumare are not meant to elicit similarities to Plato's Theory of Ideas/Forms.⁷⁶ For the Lucumi, the expression of the *Creator* in the ocean differs from the expressions in warfare and freshwater to the degree that they are personified as separate. However, Lucumi is not quite polytheistic either because there is, in some sense, a "one." Further research into the meaning of songs and the orders in which they're sung should help free Lucumi from the "unacknowledged Christian theological framework" it is often translated into, inspire some useful answers and questions that probe deeper into any connection between the work of Akpons and how Lucumi practitioners perceive the structure of the universe.⁷⁷

The peoples that make up the Yoruba in the Bight of Benin and those cobbled together as Lucumi in Cuba were part of larger networks African people in their

⁷⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (London: Heinemann, 1946), 426.

⁷⁷ John Pemberton III, forward to *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, by Kólá Abímbólá (Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006), xiii.

respective locales, who practiced traditions analogous to theirs with similar ritual-musical components. Thus, inquiries into the role Akpons play can be extended horizontally to other Africana traditions. What can we learn about a people's spiritual system via the way they invoke their Creator through music/song? How is this *way* reflected in their hierarchy of divinities? Yvonne Daniel's *Dancing Wisdom* interrogates similar questions through the study of ritual dancing in Brazilian Candomble, Cuban Lucumi, and Haitian Vodou.⁷⁸ But no work exists that juxtaposes the singing of those traditions. Such a project could examine orators adjacent to the musicians during ceremonies.

Viewing African American people as part of an "unbroken genealogy," who are the Black ritual singers in this North American religious context?⁷⁹ These figures invariably exist in one form or another because "the music created by Africans in the Americas is connected to both the literature and oratory performances of African traditional cultures."⁸⁰ Though they do not take the same form as Akpons soloists in gospel music perform similar functions. As they testify to what their God makes possible, they open up their hearts in ways which encourage the rest of the congregation to do the same. They contribute to what the soloist, choir and musicians have offered up by joining in with shouting, singing and clapping. That process of call and response binds them in their own kind of ritual cypher.

⁷⁸ Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*.

⁷⁹ Greg Carr, "What Black Studies Is Not," *Socialism and Democracy* 25, no. 11 (June 21, 2011): pp. 179-191, 181.

⁸⁰ Aaron Love, "Uninterrupted Conversations with Our Eegun: Preliminary Considerations for Methodological Approaches to the Research of African Music and the Music of John Coltrane" (PhD diss, Temple University, 2014), 79.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) utilized this modality they learned in church as they organized throughout the South. By contrast, co-founder of the SNCC Freedom Singers, Bernice Johnson Reagan insists “There weren’t soloists; there were song leaders” to de-emphasize the individuals in their congregational style.⁸¹ As the song leaders called out the first few words indicating what selection they were singing, the congregation joined in, blurring the lines between SNCC members and the communities they were organizing. This valuable exercise of placing Akpons side-by-side vocalists across the arc of African meaning-making rounds out academic understandings of Africana Religions that traditionally center *texts* and a supreme being. This would produce a model worth applying to secular singers such as Paul Robeson, who was an activist and consciously tried to connect people through song.

The “dancing body” is a different kind of text in its own right; the singing body may be something else.⁸² It is generative in that knowledge is being emitted and communicated from it through the lyrics being sung. But there is also posturing and gestures that correlates with the song and the intentionality in the singing. Amanda Villepastour uses “musical movements” to consider “the body’s engagement in music,” which are not limited to dance.⁸³ These choreographed and unchoreographed motions are bound up in songs and possession within the Lucumi context. This subtle dynamic fits in

⁸¹ “Freedom Singers,” SNCC Digital Gateway, May 1, 2018, <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/sncc-national-office/freedom-singers/>.

⁸² Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 4.

⁸³ Amanda Villepastour, “Speaking with the Body in Nigerian and Cuban Orisha Music: Musical Movements in Song, Dance, and Trance,” in *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Jennifer C. Post, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 269.

the realm of Black Performance Theory. “[B]lack performance derives from its own style and sensibilities that undergird its production. And [B]lack performance answers pressing aesthetic concerns of the communities that engage it.”⁸⁴ Racialization or how those outside of the community receive these bodily messages is not of any consequence. What Black Performance Theory may help explain are the ways in which Akpons and other ritual song leaders visibly go within themselves as they orally reach out to others. That might be called “Soul,” because of how those articulations are seen, heard, and felt. Although, Orisha Music has yet to be explored along the lines of “Soul music.”

⁸⁴ Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzales, “Introduction: From ‘Black Expression’ to ‘Black Performance,’” in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 1-15, 2.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

This preliminary study into Akpons an offering toward academic discourse on Orisha Music and invites further inquiry into how Lucumi practitioners make sense of their place in space/time vis-a-vis singing for the orisha. As essential contributors to Orisha Music and Lucumi rituals, the shortage of academic works on Akpons constitutes a noteworthy gap. Their presence at bembes is far from a mystery. Almost every work on batá drums and drummers acknowledges the role of ritual singers. But whether it is because of the dual role some drummers play as Akpons or the lack of Akpons in academia, there is a void of scholarship on their craft and them as individuals. Lucumi practitioners themselves not speaking the ritual language or being unaware of what exact it is that Akpons do may contribute to this too. The gap is likely a combination of all of these factors. Yet it still exists.

The bembe is what gives meaning to the work of Akpons. Given the historical circumstances of African people in the diaspora and the socio-political climates where orisha devotees find themselves, anytime they come together to sing and dance is consequential. Why they come together is even more so. Drumming is a way to confirm and affirm the relationships that make the spiritual communities what they are; and they are how the Lucumi materialize their concept of community and expressions of their Creator. Folklorico audiences in-turn witness representations of that modality. The

intent of the musicians and dancers differs, however, the representation and the ritual are intertwined.

Song-initiated movements by the Akpon trigger the chorus to sing and the drummers to play, which also leads the chorus to dance. This interplay - praises going up - provokes the orisha to mount their devotees - blessings coming down. Focusing on this interplay and the resulting process encourages an examination into how they occur and the song leaders who initiate them. The body of written knowledge on orisha drumming and drummers is incomplete. But it is far ahead of what is available on orisha singing and singers. Ros, Martin, and Pedroso, along with Felipe Alfonso and Lazaro Galarraga, are a few prominent names from Cuba. African American Lucumi communities have their own too. Learning about these people will enhance what is known about how they contribute to bembes.

Knowledge about Akpons is integral to furthering the knowledge about Orisha Music and the Lucumi tradition. Akpons are part of a constellation of African (religious and non-religious) vocalists and orators. So placing them in conversation with one another has the potential to generate additional knowledge on Africana approaches to sound and the experiences of the people they come from.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abímbólá, Kólá. *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006.
- Aldama, Carlos, and Umi Vaughan. *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá: Cuba, Diaspora, and the Drum*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Aletti, Vince. "Songs in the Key of Life." *The Rollingstone*, December 16, 1976.
- "Amelia Pedroso." AfroCubaWeb, 1997.
<https://www.afrocubaweb.com/ameliaPEDROSO.htm>.
- Amira, John, and Steven Cornelius. *The Music of Santería: Traditional Rhythms of the Batá Drums*. Crown Point, IN: White Cliffs Media Company, 1992.
- Ba, A. Hampate. "The Living Tradition." Essay. In *General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory 1*, edited by J Ki-Zerbo, 1:166–205. Berkley, Ca: Heinemann/California/UNESCO, 1995.
- Botwinick, Aryeh. *Skepticism, Belief, and the Modern: Maimonides to Nietzsche*. Cornell University Press, 1997.
- "How the Concept of Infinity Links Monotheism with Skepticism." *Telos* 2018, no. 183 (2018): 221–38. <https://doi.org/10.3817/0618183221>.
- Brandon, George. *Santería from Africa to the New World: the Dead Sell Memories*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1997.
- Carr, Greg. "Teaching and Studying the African(a) Experience: Definitions and Categories." Essay. In *Lessons in Africana Studies*, edited by Greg Carr, 12–20. Philadelphia, PA: Songhai Press and the School District of Philadelphia, 2006.
- "What Black Studies Is Not." *Socialism and Democracy* 25, no. 11 (June 21, 2011): 179–91.
- Chidester, David. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- Daniel, Yvonne. *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005.

- DeFrantz, Thomas F., and Anita Gonzales. "Introduction: From 'Black Expression' to 'Black Performance.'" Essay. In *Black Performance Theory*, edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz, 1–15. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Diaz, Javier. "Meaning Beyond Words: A Musical Analysis of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming." PhD diss., CUNY 2019.
- Ebrahim, Haseenah. "Afrocuban Religions in Sara Gómez's "One Way Or another" and Gloria Rolando's "Ogun"." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 22, no. 4 (Winter, 1998): 239.
- Edwards, Gary, and John Mason. *Black Gods--Òrìṣà Studies in the New World*. Fourth ed. Brooklyn, NY: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 1998.
- "Freedom Singers." SNCC Digital Gateway, May 1, 2018. <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/sncc-national-office/freedom-singers/>.
- Funkadelic. *One Nation Under a Groove*. CD. United Sound, Michigan: George Clinton, 1978.
- Hagedorn, Katherine J. *Divine Utterances: the Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001.
- Harding, Rachel E. *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- J. Moss. "Praise on the Inside." released April 2007. track 7 on V2. Gospo Centric Records. CD.
- Katz, Steven T. "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism." Essay. In *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven T. Katz, 22–74. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Love, Aaron B. "Uninterrupted Conversations with our Eegun: Preliminary Considerations for Methodological Approaches to the Research of African Music and the Music of John Coltrane." PhD diss, Temple University, 2014.
- Mason, John. *Orin Orisa: Songs for Selected Heads*. Seconded. Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1997.
- *Ìróntí Apónni Méjì: Remembrance of Two Flatterers*. Brooklyn, NY: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 2006.
- Manuel, Peter and Orlando Fiol. "Mode, Melody, and Harmony in Traditional Afro-Cuban Music: From Africa to Cuba." *Black Music Research Journal* 27, no. 1 (Spring, 2007): 45-75.

Matory, James Lorand. *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.

“Modupúe: Ibaye.” Intercultural Journeys. Accessed June, 2019.
<https://www.interculturaljourneys.org/Yorùbá>.

Olupona, Jacob O. *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014.

“Oricha Singers.” The Bearers of Sacred Sound, n.d.
http://thebearersofsacredsound.weebly.com/oricha_singers.html.

Peel, J. D. Y. “The Pastor and the Babalawo: The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland.” *Africa* 60, no. 3 (1990): 338–69.

Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Paul Shorey. London: Heinemann, 1946.

Rolando, Gloria. *Oggun: An Eternal Presence*. directed by Gloria Rolando. 1991: Cuba. DVD.

Schweitzer, Kenneth. *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming: Aesthetics, Transmission, Bonding, and Creativity*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. Random House, 1983.

Vega, Marta Moreno. “The Yoruba Orisha Tradition Comes to New York City.” *African American Review*, Special Issues on the Music, 29, no. 2 (1995): 201–6.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3042291>.

Vélez María Teresa. *Drumming for the Gods: the Life and Times of Felipe García Villamil, Santero, Palero, and abakuá*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000.

Villepastour, Amanda. “Amelia Pedroso: The Voice of a Cuban Priestess Leading from the Inside.” Essay. In *Women Singers in Global Contexts: Music, Biography, Identity*, edited by Ruth Hellier, 54–72. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

---ed. *The Yorùbá God of Drumming: Transatlantic Perspectives on the Wood That Talks*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

---“Speaking with the Body in Nigerian and Cuban Orisha Music: Musical Movements in Song, Dance, and Trance.” Essay. In *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader 2*, edited by Jennifer C. Post, 2:267–88. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

Wilhite, Bryan. "The Greatest Love Song Ever / Stevie Wonder's Key of Life." *The Liberator Magazine*. 21, September 25, 2007.

Wirtz, Kristina. *Ritual, Discourse, and Community in Cuban Santería: Speaking a Sacred World*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007.

Wynter, Sylvia. "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues." *Forum H.H.I. Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (1994): 42–73.