

RESEARCH REPORT

The Outsider Going In: Research and Participation in *Batá* Drumming and *Santería* Ritual

Kent Windress

Like many ethnomusicologists, I have come to love a music and culture that is not my own. I have vague notions about why this occurred, but I have rarely concerned myself with the reasons. While the topics that ethnomusicology engages with have broadened considerably in the past decades, I think that all musicologists (ethno- and other) are drawn towards their chosen musical fields through a process based on feelings of affinity.¹ Whether it is the case that they were already performers in the music of their chosen field of research, that their heart was in it from a young age, or that they developed an interest in their field through exposure later in life, there existed a strong motivation to understand a particular style of music on a deep intellectual level.² As Slobin concedes, 'All that is clear at this point is that strong attractions exist.'³ The inherent vagueness of this notion does not affect the rigours of the analytical research that ethnomusicologists conduct, but it can help explain the diversity of approach that is apparent in ethnomusicology today.

¹ Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) 55–56.

² Deborah Wong, 'Moving: From Performance to Performative Ethnography and Back Again,' *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, 2nd ed. (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2008) 80 (already performers); Harris M. Berger, 'Phenomenology and the Ethnography of Popular Music,' *Shadows in the Field* 62 (from a young age); Jonathan P. J. Stock, J. & Chou Chiener, 'Fieldwork at Home: European and Asian Perspectives,' *Shadows in the Field* 111 (later in life).

³ Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds*, 56.

While ethnomusicology has its roots in the study of non-Western musical traditions, today even the realm of traditional musicology, Western art music, has begun to be explored through the lens of ethnomusicological method.⁴ An increased awareness of the value of music in measuring human interactions has led to the development of anthropological musical discourse, where the actual analysis of musical sound may be subsumed or enhanced through the study of its relationship to localised or globalised phenomenon, generally of a social, political or economic nature. While debate about what can be defined as ethnomusicology is ongoing, it appears that a diversity of opinion and approach is exhibited by all ethnomusicologists. What I would like to remind the reader is that there is a base to all this diversity: a shared love of music. That this love can enrich our lives as well as create professional and intellectual opportunities is surely one of the greatest rewards for our endeavours. At least, this has been my experience.

This report is an account of how my interest in *batá* drumming in Cuba led me on a journey of intellectual and personal discovery that gave birth to a religious commitment. It is a narrative of personal growth and transformation as I, the observing 'outsider,' became an initiate and participant in the Afro-Cuban faith system called Santería. I initially visited Cuba as an outsider with only an imagined perception of the realities of that country. I have now gone 'in,' and have been accepted on the same terms as any Cuban who has undergone the same level of initiation. While this acceptance has created unique opportunities for research, it has also presented some challenges that I would not otherwise have had to face. Some of the issues raised by my decision to participate in the culture of Santería will be discussed in this article. At the same time, I hope to address reflexively some general issues that confront ethnomusicology today, as I have come to perceive them: how affinities are produced, in what ways and to what extent the musician observer can participate in another musical culture, and ethical considerations surrounding sensitive information.

A Fascination with Cuba

My musical affinity lies with the *batá* drumming used in the Afro-Cuban religion called Santería. Santería is a religious system that has developed from the beliefs of the Yoruban slaves brought to Cuba during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and is practiced extensively in Cuba today. Devotees worship the *orishas*, mythic-historic figures that are believed to govern the earth and its inhabitants and control elemental forces. While hundreds of *orishas* were worshipped amongst the Yoruba, only a handful of these survived the Atlantic crossing. When confronted with the Catholic beliefs of their Spanish masters, the Yoruba hid their traditional worship behind the guise of Catholic saints. Today the *orishas* are syncretised with those saints whom the Yoruba saw as exemplifying similar characteristics. For example, Eleggua, an *orisha* often described as a child, was syncretised with El Niño de Atocha, a popular depiction of the infant Jesus in Spain and Latin America who is believed to aid those in desperate circumstances.⁵ While Catholicism has been a part of Santería's development and history, it is undoubtedly the

⁴ William Benjamin, 'Mozart: Piano concerto No.17 in G Major, K.453, Movement 1' (pp. 332–76), and John Roeder, 'Autonomy and Dialogue in Elliot Carter's *Enchanted Preludes*' (pp. 377–414), *Analytical Studies in World Music*, ed. Michael Tenzer (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2006).

⁵ For a history of El Niño de Atocha, see www.ninoatocha.com/history.html, accessed 25 Nov. 2011.

African nature of the religion that dominates religious philosophy and practice.⁶ This is evident in the extensive use of drumming in Santería, and in particular the use of the *batá* drums.

The *batá* are three hourglass-shaped drums, each of which is played by one person. While they originate from the Yoruba people of West Africa, the *batá* were recreated in Cuba by slaves of Yoruba origin. Associated with the religious beliefs and ceremonies of the Yoruba, the *batá* also fulfilled this function as Yoruba slaves in Cuba recreated their beliefs in their new environment. The *batá* range in size from small to large, and are known in that order as the *okónkolo*, *itótele* and *iyá* (see Fig. 1). The drums have an extensive repertoire of rhythms that honour the *orishas*.

Figure 1. *Batá* drums, from L to R: *Okónkolo*, *Itótele*, *Iyá* (photograph by the author)



My fascination with *batá* started as a fascination with world music. While studying drum set as an undergraduate, I was exposed to music from different parts of the world: Classical Indian music, Indonesian gamelan, Eastern European folk and contemporary African music all helped open my ears to a whole world of rhythm that I had not known existed. But what really grabbed my attention was the music of Latin America, in particular the music of Cuba. In 1997 the film and soundtrack of the Buena Vista Social Club album was released, sparking a worldwide renewal of interest in the music of Cuba, and I was one of those affected. The density of the percussion, the importance of rhythm to all instruments, and the energy and emotion that permeated these tracks seemed to call to me. Felipe Cornejo, a professional Latin percussionist who has also travelled to Cuba and learnt *batá*, echoes this sentiment:

If you fall in love with a passion that you have, you're going to go ... You'll just go [to] where it comes from.⁷

⁶ For a more thorough examination of Santería, see Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: African Spirits in America*, 2nd edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

⁷ Felipe Cornejo, interview with the author, Melbourne, 10 Apr. 2010.

First Steps

When I first travelled to Cuba in 2005 I was told by a friend to contact Jacinto Herrera. Jacinto had spent two years in Australia, playing music and giving workshops on Cuban music and percussion. He was the first person to play *batá* in Australia, and he exposed many musicians he met at that time to Afro-Cuban religious music, as well as to popular Cuban music styles. Jacinto is also a *babalao*.

Babalaos are considered the senior priesthood in Santería. They undergo initiation to be able to communicate with Orula, the *orisha* who holds the knowledge of a person's potential destiny. In Santería cosmology, before being born into this world and in the presence of Oludumare (the Creator) and Orula, each individual chooses the destiny they will live out on earth. As humans forget their destiny when they are born, communicating with Orula allows the person to ascertain the best way to proceed in life. This is only possible through the mediation of the *babalaos*.

So for my first three months in Cuba I was immediately thrown into a world of Afro-Cuban percussion and religion. While my musical side was satisfied with lessons on a variety of Cuban percussion instruments (congas, *timbales*, *cajon*, bongos, *güiro*), my fascination with Cuban culture was also being fed. I enjoyed the Spanish-influenced guitar sounds of Cuban *son*, as exemplified by the Buena Vista Social Club album, but what I really wanted to learn was the percussion-driven sounds of Afro-Cuban music. This was not only due to my natural inclinations as a drummer, but also because of my exposure to and fascination with the religious culture that supported these performances.

Broadly speaking, Afro-Cuban music is divided into secular and religious styles, although the line is often blurred in performance. Percussion, singing and dancing are common to both styles; melodic instruments apart from voice are rare, although they do appear. The most common forms of Afro-Cuban secular music are the styles incorporated under the rumba complex (*guagancó*, *yambú* and *columbia*) and the *comparsa* music of the street carnivals. Religious music is specifically associated with the various African cults that survived and adapted in Cuba, including music of the Ewe-Fon, various Congo tribes and, most prolifically today, the Yoruba. Each group has its own drums, repertoire and accompanying ceremonial rites. As Jamiel 'Popo' Crespo, one of my *batá* teachers in Cuba, explained to me most musicians who play secular Afro-Cuban music also play religious music.⁸ It is also apparent, when listening to Afro-Cuban secular music, that many religious subjects are referenced. My desire to learn how to play Afro-Cuban music eventually led to my direct involvement in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería.

The first step taken by people wishing to become involved in Santería is a ceremony known as receiving 'la mano de Orula,' or the hand of Orula. The ceremony involves receiving attributes that represent Orula, as well as the *orishas* known as the *guerreros*, or warriors. The *guerreros* are Elegua, Ogun and Ochosi. They are believed to protect the initiates from malevolent forces that could harm them, and hence are vital to one's life. During my first trip in 2005 Jacinto invited me to receive 'la mano de Orula,' himself acting as my sponsor. This ceremony is quite common in Cuba, and I believe Jacinto offered me this opportunity in response to the interest I was expressing about Santería and its culture. Although I was hesitant about making this

⁸ Jamiel Crespo, personal communication, Havana, 17 Aug. 2011.

commitment, my curiosity, combined with a desire to fulfil a personal spiritual need won over my uncertainty. I had always been interested in religions from around the world, and here was a religion that I could combine with my love of drumming. This attraction proved very strong. On Easter weekend in 2005 I took this first step along the spiritual path of Santería.

When I first travelled to Cuba I was not aware of a desire to study ethnomusicology. The purpose of my trip was to learn how to play Cuban percussion instruments, following on from my primary exposure to Cuban music through the Buena Vista Social Club album. Once in Cuba, I was also exposed to a number of other styles, especially the music of Afro-Cuban traditions. Being a drummer I was naturally attracted to the rhythm of music. Afro-Cuban music is rhythmically rich and varied, and I felt a strong desire to learn how to play it. But once I was there, I also began to feel a strong attraction towards the religious culture that is the basis for this music. This was satisfying another aspect of my personality, the part of me that desired some form of spiritual connection. The combination formed an even stronger attraction that was to fuel two further trips to Cuba.

Batá—A background

My third and latest trip to Cuba was to conduct research on *batá* performance. This is to be the basis for a thesis for my master's degree. In the thesis I wrote for my post-graduate diploma, I explored *batá* performance in Australia, and conducted interviews with a small community of *batá* players in Melbourne and Sydney. My desire has been to explore the performance practices that exist and how they have developed, particularly in response to interest from outside Cuba. My research thus far has shown that the development of *batá* performance in Cuba is quite unique, and its influence is spreading globally. I will now briefly discuss the function of religious *batá* performance and the development of new performance modes that are important to understanding the *batá's* relevance to a number of issues in ethnomusicology. Previous studies that have informed my work on this subject include works on the changing performance practices of *batá* and Afro-Cuban music in general by Hagedorn and Moore, Vélez's ethnobiography of Cuban *batá* player Felipe García Villamil, the historical ethnographies of *batá's* appearance and development in Cuba by Ramos and Marcuzzi, and Schweitzer's excellent study of performance practice and pedagogy in Cuban *batá* today.⁹

Batá drums are used primarily in the rituals of Santería known as '*toque de santos*,' or simply *toques*. Before 1936 *batá* had never been played outside these rituals, and the skills necessary to play them were held exclusively by practitioners of Santería. A *toque de santo* is a festive ceremony held to honour the *orishas*, also known in Spanish as *santos*, or saints. The *batá* used in these performances are ritually consecrated, and inside the drum are certain materials that

⁹ Katherine J. Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); Robin D. Moore, *Music and Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba* (Berkeley, Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2006); María Teresa Vélez, *Drumming for the Gods: The life and times of Felipe García Villamil, santero, palero, and abakuá* (Philadelphia Temple University Press, 2000); Miguel Ramos, *The Empire Beats On: Oyo, Batá Drums and Hegemony in Nineteenth-century Cuba*, PhD thesis, Florida International University, 2000; Michael D. Marcuzzi, *A Historical Study of the Ascendant Role of Batá Drumming in Cuban Orisha Worship*, PhD thesis, York University (Toronto), 2005; Kenneth George Schweitzer, *Afro-Cuban Batá Drum Aesthetics: Developing Individual and Group Technique, Sound and Ability*, PhD thesis, University of Maryland, 2003.

embody the *orisha* known as *Aña*.¹⁰ *Aña* is the *orisha* of sound, and allows the *batá* to ‘speak’ directly with the other *orishas*. A *toque de santo* is held for a number of reasons, but the most common in Cuba today is what is known as the ‘*asiento*,’ or the making of the saint. After someone receives the *guerreros*, it is divined whether further initiation is necessary. If it is, the person may be required to become a *santero*.¹¹ A *santero* is a priest of the *orishas*, and a complex seven-day ceremony is required to complete this process. During this time a specific *orisha* is ‘seated’ in the head of the initiate, and the *santero* becomes a priest of this particular *orisha*. On the fourth day of the *asiento*, the initiate, now known as *iyawó*, is presented to the *batá* containing *Aña*.

The *toque de santo* begins with the *oru seco*, or *oru igbodú*. The *igbodú* is a room containing an altar to the *orisha* who is being honoured (see Fig. 2). The three *bataleros* (*batá* players) perform rhythms for twenty-two *orishas* in this room. These twenty-two *orishas* form the basis for worship in Santería.¹² Although more are recognised in Cuba, they have no specific rhythms that are performed during a *toque de santo*. *Oru seco*, or ‘dry *oru*,’ acknowledges that the *batá* are played without singing accompaniment.

Figure 2. The altar inside the *igbodú* dedicated to the *orisha* Oyá. *Bataleros* play towards this when performing the *oru seco* (photograph by the author)



¹⁰ Also known as *ayan*. See Marcuzzi, *Historical Study of the Ascendant Role of Batá Drumming*, 142–220, for a detailed history of *Aña*.

¹¹ In Spanish the masculine noun is used to denote male and female identity when both sexes are included. *Santeros* can be male or female, but when talking about women practitioners the correct noun is *santera*.

¹² For a list of these *orishas* see Schweitzer, *Afro-Cuban Batá Drum Aesthetics*, 31.

At the conclusion of the *oru seco*, the *bataleros* move to a larger room where the main performance takes place. They proceed to play the *oru cantado*, or sung *oru*. This is similar to the *oru seco*, but now the sung liturgy dedicated to the *orishas* is added by the *akpon*, or singer. The *oru cantado* more or less follows the same order as the *oru seco*, although some *orishas* may be omitted. The *oru cantado* is an inclusive performance, where the religious participants attending the *toque* are expected to interact with the musicians. The songs are responsorial, and the *akpon* not only guides song choice but is responsible for exciting the participants to respond enthusiastically. All the words are in *lucumí*, a hybrid version of the Yoruba language that has been 'creolised.'

If the *toque de santo* is part of an *asiento*, it is after the *oru cantado* that the *iyawó* is presented to the *batá*. The *iyawó* is led out towards the drums, where s/he ritually salutes *Aña* by placing his/her head on the three *batá*. Songs for the *orisha* being 'seated' in the head of the *iyawó* are then performed. The *iyawó* dances in front of the *batá* in the hope of being possessed by his or her *orisha*. If signs of possession are shown, the presentation is judged to have been successful and the *iyawó* is led away.

After this the *wemilere* begins. This is freer in form than the previous sections, and it is here that the purpose of the *toque de santo* becomes apparent. The *santeros* who are present dance in front of the drums, and wait to see if the particular *orisha* that has previously been seated in their head manifests through them in the form of possession. While there are dozens of *orishas* acknowledged in Cuba, only eight are commonly 'seated' today (Eleggua, Ogun, Ochosi, Obatalá, Oyá, Ochun, Yemayá and Changó). The *akpon* chooses songs that celebrate a specific *orisha* based on signs of possession demonstrated by the participants. When these signs become apparent, the *akpon* will focus his attention on this *santero*, urging the *orisha* to come down and 'mount' the chosen *santero*. This is the most spectacular section of the *toque de santo*, and a sight that is not done justice by words. Possession is valued in Santería as allowing the *orishas* to be present amongst their believers in physical form. While sometimes only one *orisha* may mount, at other times more may come to the *toque* at the same time. Once present the *orishas* present enjoy the party, dancing and eating and offering advice and warnings to their followers.

Thus the religious function of a *toque de santo* is to offer praise to the *orisha*, legitimise the initiation of an *iyawó*, and bring the *orisha* down to earth through possession. In Cuba today *toque de santos* are quite common, and ritual musicians are in demand. But *batá* performance is also common in secularised performances known commonly in Cuba as folkloric performances.

The stylised performance of previously hermetic Afro-Cuban religious music was actively promoted by the Cuban revolutionary government after 1959. Afro-Cuban culture was acknowledged as 'a repository of Cuba's unique character, a powerful populist symbol of the nation.'¹³ Many Afro-Cubans took advantage of the official policy to form folkloric music ensembles, often performing a repertoire of music and dance that belonged to a number of African traditions in a single performance, including the music of *batá*. Since the 1960s these groups have done much to promote Afro-Cuban religious music in Cuba and abroad.

Today in Cuba the *batá* are almost symbolic of the African heritage of Cuba. They are used extensively in all kinds of popular music as well as religious performance. They appear in the

¹³ Moore, *Music and Revolution*, 174.

jazz music of Chucho Valdes, the fusion rock music of Síntesis, popular *timba* dance music and *son*. But the major distinction of these performances is that the *batá* used do not contain *Aña*, that is they are not considered sacred. They are known as *aberíkula batá*, and have no sacred value apart from the respect most musicians show to any instrument. It is this change in performance practice that I hope to investigate in my future research.

Difficulties and Benefits of Initiation to Research

Between June and October 2011 I visited Cuba for the third time. During this visit I wanted specifically to conduct preparatory field research on *batá* performance as it occurs in Cuba today, and to uncover the history of its development. I went with the intention of learning to play the *batá*, and hoped to be able to play in ceremonial performances. I also wished to attend *toque de santos* as an observer, to see other secularised performances that included *batá* playing, and conduct formal interviews with performers and participants.

Omo Aña

In order to fulfill one of my desires and play in *batá* ceremonies, I needed to undergo a ceremony where I was sworn to *Aña*. This involves being presented to a particular set of *batá* drums that contain *Aña*. Those who have been sworn to *Aña* are known as *omo Aña*, or children of *Aña*. *Omo Aña* are not just musicians but ritual specialists in Santería. They not only seek to master the complex rhythms of the *batá*, but must also fulfil the religious requirements demanded by the *orisha Aña*,¹⁴ and the *santeros* who engage them to perform. All the *omo Aña* I have met have at least received 'la mano de Orula,' and many are *santeros*. Women and homosexual men are not permitted to become *omo Aña*.¹⁵ On the other hand, *aberíkula batá* that are played in folkloric performances can be played by anyone who learns the necessary skills. With the help of my friend Jacinto Herrera I was sworn to *Aña* on the 27 June, 2011. I was now spiritually prepared to participate in *toque de santos*.

As an *omo Aña* I am accepted by the *batá* drumming community as one of them. This is not to say that they do not recognise the difference between my status as a foreigner with access to money and their status as Cubans with little opportunity for material advancement, but that they see the religious bond we share as something that is ultimately more important. This bond is based on the experience of sharing the ritual that everybody undergoes before being recognised as *omo Aña*, and is manifested through specific ways of saluting *batá* that contain *Aña* and ways of greeting other *omo Aña* that are not readily known amongst others, even *santeros*.

As an *omo Aña* I noticed a marked difference in my access to a *toque de santo*. Before I underwent initiation I had attended the *asiento* of Jacinto's wife, Elonel. On this occasion I stayed towards the back of the room to watch the *bataleros* and *akpon* performing. This became difficult as the room became increasingly crowded. After I became *omo Aña* I was allowed to stand beside or behind the drums. This space is reserved for *omo Aña*, and participants are not

¹⁴ These include, amongst other duties and obligations, undergoing the initiation ceremony, abstaining from sexual activity the day before playing *Aña batá* and caring for and making sacrifices to the *Aña batá*.

¹⁵ For an excellent perspective on this restriction and how women in Santería are responding to this today, read Amanda Vincent's interview with Amelia Pedroso, 'Rebel Priestess and Sacred Drums,' *Glendora Review: African Quarterly on the Arts* 3.3–4 (2004): 57–62.

allowed to come too close to the drums unless they are offering a ritual salute. This position offered an excellent view of the drums and the singer, and allowed me to see how the musicians interacted with each other and the participants. I could now also fulfil one of my initial desires when coming to Cuba and perform on the *batá* during a *toque de santo*.

Making Santo

While in Cuba I made a very big decision that would not only affect the course of my research, but also the rest of my life. As I mentioned earlier, after receiving *la mano de Orula* it is sometimes necessary to make a further commitment to Santería by making *santo*. When I received *la mano de Orula*, I was told that one day I would become a *santero*, something that I had avoided up until my third trip, and did not expect to undergo this time around either. The *asiento* ceremony lasts for seven days, and requires a lot of preparation and expense. Jacinto, as well as being my friend, was also my *padrino*, or godfather in Santería. This was because he had sponsored me to receive *la mano de Orula*. As a religious person who believes in the benefits of Santería he also desired to see me make *santo*. We discussed this a lot during my initial month in Cuba, and I finally decided to proceed with his help.

This decision had nothing to do with my research or with my trip. I only wished to learn to play *batá* and gather information for my thesis. But I had to admit to myself that I was not only interested in Santería academically. I felt drawn towards its philosophy and morals, and truly believed that it was a religion that would help me. Even when I became *omo Aña*, it was not only to gain better access to *batá* performance in a ritual context. I wanted to play *batá* for the *orishas*, to be able to perform in a ceremony where everybody present held deep convictions that the *orishas* were living presences that could be persuaded to join them through music, and that the *orishas* were there to help humanity.

But how did this affect my research? And what does it mean to be an initiate in a religion in which you are conducting research? The following account will highlight some of the problems I was to encounter after making this decision—about which, at the end of the day, I have absolutely no regrets.

Following the Advice of Orula

Sometimes the constraints imposed by active participation in religion come into conflict with field research. This became apparent to me when I was preparing to make *santo*. I had been invited to attend a *toque de santo* in Matanzas by Elonel. Matanzas is located about an hour's drive to the east of Havana. I saw this invitation as an opportunity to conduct research, including recording the ceremony and interviewing the *bataleros* involved. I was becoming more familiar with the *batá* repertoire in Havana, and I hoped this experience would shed some light on the similarities and differences between *batá* performance in Matanzas and Havana. While they share the same roots, the two styles have developed some differences in repertoire and techniques.

A few days before the ceremony, I was sitting at the house of Jacinto. As Jacinto is a *babalao*, he consults Orula each morning. He does this by reading the *okpele*, a chain that links eight pieces of shell. When he throws the chain, the shells appear either with the concave side up or down. There are 256 possible combinations, and each individual combination corresponds

to what is known as an *odu*. Each *odu* offers advice on the best way to proceed for the day. It is a practice every *babalao* must complete before beginning the day, and relates back to not only the *babalao*, but also those in his religious family. On this particular morning Jacinto looked at me and said that Orula was not happy that I was going to Matanzas. He said that if I were to go, there was a good chance I would become confused. Jacinto referred to the fact that I was about to make *santo*, and that it was very important that I went into the ceremony free of all doubt and with total faith. Any confusion on my behalf about what I was doing and why could lead to problems during the ceremony. While he did not say outright that I should not go, he said that I needed to be very careful if I went to Matanzas.

While I was thinking about this advice, Elonel heard about it. She told me very directly that if Orula says I should not go, it is simple. I do not go. While I was a bit disappointed not to be able to see the *toque* and conduct what would have been valuable research, I felt that it was very important to follow the advice of Orula. If by going I could create problems for my own *asiento*, I believed it was better not to go.

The consultations of Orula are one of the most important and respected rituals of Santería. *Babalaos'* reputations are built on their ability to communicate with Orula on behalf of all people, not just *santeros*. Many people in Cuba will seek consultations with *babalaos*, even if they are not initiated at any level in Santería. Elonel told me that even doctors in Cuba will recommend that a patient seek a consultation with a *babalao* if medical treatment is not proving sufficient.

Belief in Santería is strong in Cuba. Even purported non-believers are careful not to offend *santeros* or *babalaos* in the belief that such people can exact retribution through spiritual means. While this belief may seem to come into conflict with a scientific, analytical and objective approach that is common to Western academic disciplines, my own faith in Santería did not allow me to ignore the warning I was given. But my decision was not based on faith alone. I have seen *babalaos* with no knowledge of the person who is seeking their guidance deliver uncannily accurate descriptions of the personality of this person, often bringing to light issues that this person has not disclosed to anyone. My decision not to go to Matanzas was based on empirical insights that, more often than not, Orula was right.

Figure 3. Jacinto Herrera, *babalao* and musician, and the author, El Rio Almendares, Havana, 9 September 2011.



Life as an *Iyawó*

Once I had made *santo*, I became an *iyawó*. *Iyawó* translates as bride of the orisha. Both males and females are addressed this way. As an *iyawó* I technically have no name for a year, but am addressed as *iyawó*. There are a number of restrictions placed on an *iyawó* for this first year of initiation. An *iyawó* is expected to lead an ascetic lifestyle. This includes not going out during the day without one's *madrina*, or godmother (Elonel, in my case), not being out after 6pm, not being in crowds, wearing all white, using only one's own eating utensils, eating on the floor and not drinking alcohol. An *iyawó* is viewed as a child by the religious community, regardless of his or her real age. Accordingly, the religious community sees it as necessary to impose rules that will safeguard the *ivayó*/child, and adhering to these restrictions demonstrates that the initiate has the necessary respect and discipline to become a fully authorised *santero*. The rules are meant to instil discipline and enable the *ivayó* to avoid attracting negative energy that might interfere with the power to communicate and represent the *orisha* that is installed in the head during the *asiento*.

After I made *santo*, I had three weeks remaining in Cuba. I had wanted to undertake more research during this time, but soon discovered that that would be difficult. While my *madrina* was willing to take me to places to conduct my research, I also understood that she was in charge of organising the home of Jacinto and herself. This included all the cooking, washing and cleaning. She was now also responsible for washing my clothes and cooking for me, duties that a *madrina* takes on for her godchildren. As lunch was always cooked, I realised that having her come out with me during the day would deprive my *padrino* of food until she returned. And now it was not possible to go out to watch musical performances during the evening. While musical events that included *batá* did take place during the day, it was frowned upon to attend these as an *iyawó* since being in crowds is not encouraged.

While it may sound as if I were in a position where I could not do extensive research, this was not the case. My *madrina* and *padrino* had both been professional musicians in Cuba. My *madrina* had been a singer in a folkloric ensemble that performed the music of *batá*, while my *padrino* was a multi-instrumentalist who had performed on *batá* in Australia. So as well as understanding the connection between Santería and *batá*, they were also experienced in the secular performance of this tradition. I conducted formal interviews with them that were highly valuable and yielded a lot of information. My *madrina* recounted her time spent singing folkloric music with the famous rumba singer Fariña, as well as her time in the folkloric group Fuego. I was interested to know how Elonel came to sing folkloric music and learn the songs of the *orishas*, and thus to gain an insight into the ethnographic situation of folkloric ensembles in Cuba. I was also able to record her singing songs to the *orishas*. My *padrino* was able to give me an insight into the development of *batá* tuition in formal schooling in Cuba, as well as an overview of the history of *batá* performance in Cuba. Also of value was my *oyurbona*, or second *padrino*. He comes from Matanzas, and is a godchild of one of Cuba's most famous *bataleros*, Esteban 'Chacha' Vega (1925–2007).¹⁶ I was able to interview him about the main points of difference in the Havana and Matanzas styles of *batá*.

¹⁶ Tina Gallagher was given this birth date by Vega during an interview, but states that others assert he is older than this. See <http://afrocubaweb.com/chacha.htm>, accessed 26 Nov. 2011.

I do not believe that making *santo* gained me more access to people who could benefit my research. As I was interested in researching *batá* in religious and secular settings, I did not want to spend my time solely examining *batá* from a religious perspective. But as many people who perform *batá* are involved in both religious and secular performance, I did feel that I became more accepted as an insider. Making *santo* is a serious commitment, and that commitment is respected by most Cubans. So although a foreigner, I felt that I had bridged a gap that often lies between a researcher and his subject. I was no longer only interested in the culture that produced *batá* performance; I was a participant in that very culture.

As a participant, I am expected to adhere to the rules that govern that culture. For me, these rules do not interfere too much with the focus of my study. I want to research and analyse the performance of *batá* drumming, not the activities involved in religious ceremonies. Whereas most ceremonies in Santería are only open to invited practitioners, *toque de santos* are more likely to be public events where anyone showing the proper respect can be admitted. This is not the case for other ritual behaviours. There are many aspects of my initiation that I cannot share publicly, generally concerning the rituals. This is true of all the initiations in Santería, not just the *asiento*. I was told specifically not to divulge this information. That does not mean that people did not want me to share my experiences with others. Many of the Cubans I have met are active in sharing their knowledge of Santería with foreign researchers. But what constitutes secret knowledge in Santería today has also changed. This is a situation that has seen *batá* music develop into the secular art form that transcends its religious roots.

The *batá* that contain *Aña* are considered sacred. These are not played outside ceremonial contexts, and are cared for just like any other *orisha*. My *batá* teacher was very reluctant at first to allow me to take photos of these *batá*. While recording their sound was not a problem, visual documentation appeared to be. But during my presentation to the *batá* my father was allowed to film parts of the *oru seco*, albeit relatively discreetly. Jacinto told him to film from the window of the *igbodú*, so the *bataleros* were not overtly aware of his presence. For Jacinto, visual documentation of my ceremony was important to validate my *asiento* in Australia. Even though the *bataleros* were aware this was happening, they implied acceptance by not reacting.

When *aberíkula batá* and the rhythms for the *orisha* were played for a non-initiated audience in the 1960s, a split in opinion occurred in the religious community. While some saw this practice as a way to express and educate people about Afro-Cuban beliefs and culture, those with more conservative religious attitudes saw it as a profanity.¹⁷ While there is much more to this debate than I can elucidate here, a compromise has been reached today whereby *batá* rhythms and songs are played only on *aberíkula batá* in almost any musical context. But as far as I knew the recording and filming of *toque de santos* was only conducted by *bataleros* to be used as an educational resource amongst themselves.¹⁸ This latter was certainly my intention. But since returning recently, I have noticed a huge increase in videos of *toque de santos* being posted on YouTube. I am unsure whether the people posting these clips have permission to do so. The videos I have seen posted are of the *oru seco* and the *oru cantado*, and I have not seen

¹⁷ Moore, *Music and Revolution*, 188.

¹⁸ Schweitzer, *Afro-Cuban Batá Drum Aesthetics*, 180.

any showing actual possessions. My sister was at my *asiento*, and as she tried to take photos at my presentation to the *batá* while *orishas* were present, one of the *orisha* stormed up to her screaming 'No photos!' Needless to say my sister quickly put her camera away. What would you say to a god?

Conclusion: The Outsider as Insider

My perspective on *batá* performance has been deepened by my involvement in Santería. A *toque de santo* is no longer an event merely for analysis and interpretation. I have ritual obligations during these events that transcend my role as an observer. I do not believe that these obligations preclude my ability to be objective. *Batá* performances are dynamic and varied, and I now have a much greater understanding of the criteria by which *batá* players and participants judge the success or failure of a performance.

My work as an ethnomusicologist and my faith in Santería are separate, yet I have moved well beyond the insider/outsider dichotomy that often operates when ethnomusicologists research music in a culture other than their own. This may not have anything to do with the fact that I have made *santo*. This was my third trip to Cuba, and I had already made many contacts that could help my research. But I felt a deeper level of respect from my informants after I had made *santo*, and this is undeniably helpful when eliciting information. But I now have to be very careful when divulging information not to betray the trust that they have put in me, as this would now sever not only a mutual respect based on trust, but a religious bond based on faith.

My research is not exclusively focused on religious *batá* performance, but any *batá* performance in the world is informed by the religious context. This interdependence will become more explicit in my future work, but for now it is enough to say that there are very few performances of *batá* that do not incorporate the rhythms that are played during religious performances. If anything, when *batá* are used in secular performance they reference the religious culture in which they originated. Accordingly, my experience of and insight into the religious performance of *batá* will form the basis for all my future work.

Everything develops and changes, and the exploration of this process is what I hope to achieve. As Jacinto, my *padrino* and friend told me, 'Today we say you need water from the river for this ceremony, but in two hundred years we might say you need water from the moon.' Everything changes.