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## **Afrocuba de Matanzas: 50 Years On, and: Afrocuba de Matanzas: Live at El Palenque—Havana 2005**

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Despite any shortcomings, Veal's *Dub* gives scholars, teachers, and listeners a lot to work with and to build on. Like the influential engineers and producers he profiles, we would do well to take this text and play with it, add and subtract other voices, create our own version. If only Veal and Wesleyan Press would make the master tapes available . . .

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**CHRISTIAN WEAVER, PRODUCER AND DIRECTOR.** *Afrocuba de Matanzas: 50 Years On*. UK: La Timbala Films, 2007. DVD, 80 minutes.

*Afrocuba de Matanzas: Live at El Palenque–Havana 2005*.  
La Timbala Films, 2007. DVD, 70 minutes.

La Timbala Music and Dance, a performing arts company based in the UK, has recently produced and released two DVDs documenting the repertoire and performance traditions of one of Cuba's seminal folkloric groups, AfroCuba de Matanzas. The release of the DVDs was meant to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Matanzas-based group, which was founded in 1957 under the original name Guaguancó Neopoblano. The first DVD, entitled *Afrocuba de Matanzas: 50 Years On*, showcases the diversity and

comprehensive nature of the group's repertoire, representing the music and dance traditions derived from the four principal African ethnic groups brought to Cuba during the transatlantic slave trade: the Yoruba/Lukumí, Bantu/Congo, Carabalí/Abakuá, and Dahomey/Arará.<sup>1</sup> The second DVD, entitled *Afrocuba de Matanzas: Live at El Palenque—Havana 2005*, consists of a live concert filmed at the headquarters of the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional* (National Folkloric Group, or CFN) in Havana during their weekly *Sábado de la Rumba* (Saturday Rumba). Generally the CFN performs during the first half of this event, and an invited rumba or folkloric group, either local or from a different Cuban province, is featured in the second half.

La Timbala and the company's founder, Christian Weaver, are to be heartily commended for this much-awaited DVD project featuring AfroCuba de Matanzas. Despite the critical acclaim and popularity garnered by the group both within Cuba and internationally, AfroCuba has suffered in the last ten years from underexposure. The dearth of recording and international touring opportunities is partially related to the increase in antagonistic rhetoric and hardening of foreign policy that characterized the relationship between the United States and Cuba during the George W. Bush administration.<sup>2</sup> Judging from the 20-page informational booklets that accompany each DVD, Weaver, who is currently completing dissertation research on the Cuban rumba at the University of Salford in the United Kingdom, is an extremely knowledgeable researcher as well as a filmmaker. He provides extensive historical and descriptive information on the Afro-Cuban traditions represented in AfroCuba's performances, all the while addressing many issues surrounding the representation of folkloric musical practices. For example, Weaver is insistent in his critique of the "folklorists' view" of rumba, which seeks to establish and define fixed boundaries for traditional musical practices and to construct them as static entities that do not undergo change and innovation (Weaver 2007b, 4–5).

The booklet accompanying the first DVD focuses largely on the history of the Cuban slave trade and African contributions to national culture, presenting information that has been well-researched in both Cuban and U.S. scholarship. Weaver discusses the basic religious concepts and musical practices of the four principal African ethnic groups listed above and the formation of *cabildos de nación*, mutual aid societies formed in the 19th century by Africans and their descendants. The *cabildos'* official purpose was to orient newly arrived slaves to life in colonial Cuba, but they also functioned as the primary venues for slaves and free blacks to continue practicing their musical and religious traditions. Weaver's narrative emphasizes the unique cultural identity of the province and city of Matanzas, known to many as "the cradle of Afro-Cuban culture" due to the ongoing maintenance of Afro-Cuban religious traditions such as Arará, *Iyesá*, and *Brícamo* that are not currently practiced in any other region of the country. The booklet that

accompanies the rumba concert DVD presents a lengthy narrative divided into five sections: a brief history of AfroCuba de Matanzas; a section on the origins and emergence of rumba; a discussion of the rumba complex;<sup>3</sup> the musical elements of rumba, with an explanation of the relationships between the song, the different percussion instruments, and the *clave* rhythm that structures the entire ensemble; and finally a section with detailed commentary about each of the pieces performed on the DVD.

While Weaver provides a comprehensive account of rumba's origins, historiography, and musical features, there are some important details that have been overlooked. His discussions of the "West African" roots of rumba seem to disregard the overriding academic scholarship recognizing that Central African, Bantu-derived musical and dance practices—and to a lesser extent, Carabalí-derived Abakuá dance—are the primary antecedents of rumba. He discusses the debates surrounding the origins of rumba, mentioning two specific theories: first, that Gangá traditions constitute the main predecessors of rumba, and second that it derives from the Bantu yuka dance. While the first theory, initially advanced by Fernando Ortiz, has been refuted in Cuban scholarship (Basso Ortiz 2000), the majority of scholars concur that Bantu-derived secular traditions such as yuka and makuta do in fact constitute the main influences on rumba percussion and dance.<sup>4</sup> In general Weaver's narrative downplays the Bantu/Congo contributions to rumba, which confirms to the general trend in scholarship on Afro-diasporic music and culture to privilege the Yoruba contributions at the expense of "less complex" traditions of the Bantu and other ethnic groups.

Furthermore, there are a few factual errors in Weaver's discussion of *batarumba*, the innovative rumba hybrid created by AfroCuba de Matanzas that fuses secular rumba rhythms with Yoruba-derived sacred batá drumming. One concerns a minor detail: Batarumba is erroneously listed twice in the rumba DVD booklet as emerging in 1976, rather than the commonly acknowledged date of 1973. The more substantive inaccuracy relates to the dance steps associated with batarumba. Weaver writes that the dance follows the principles of guaguancó dance, the most popular of the three styles of rumba still performed today. As discussed by rumba scholar Yvonne Daniel (1995), and as I noted during my fieldwork with AfroCuba de Matanzas, batarumba actually incorporates many different Cuban popular and folkloric dance styles, including rumba, son, and dance steps associated with different orishas (Yoruba deities). Several members of AfroCuba have emphasized its open nature, stating that any dance style could theoretically be incorporated into batarumba dance, although the group's arranged choreographies most often include a mixture of the three aforementioned dance traditions.

*AfroCuba de Matanzas: 50 Years On* is a fitting and extremely well-crafted tribute to the creative work of the highly esteemed folkloric group. The

DVD includes nine choreographed performance pieces, representing distinct genres within each of the four major African-derived religious/folkloric traditions. The Lukumí tradition, which boasts the most variety in terms of religious practices and instrumental ensembles, accounts for four of the nine tracks: a dance dramatizing the romantic encounter between the orishas Ochún and Oggún, and three other dances honoring, respectively, Yemayá, Oggún, and Changó. One distinction omitted from the brief introductory narrative appearing on the screen before each piece concerns the different instrumental ensembles accompanying each orisha song. There are four different Lukumí ensembles that can accompany orisha songs which are featured in the DVD: the batá drums, the güiro ensemble (characterized by the use of three shékeres, or hollowed out gourds covered in beads), the bembé drums, and the Iyesá drums. While these ensembles are described in detail in the accompanying booklet, they are not identified as such in the brief introductory narrative that appears on the screen before each piece, information that would have helped the inexperienced viewer connect the different ensemble names to their specific performances. The Ochún/Oggún dance, for example, features the güiro ensemble, which has a very different rhythmic feel and texture than that of the better-known batá drum ensemble. The choreographed dance for Changó features batá drums, while the dance for Yemayá features a wonderfully innovative toque mezclado (mixed rhythm) accompaniment that highlights the timbral and rhythmic diversity of the various Lukumí percussion ensembles. The song begins with batá drums, switches in the middle of the song to the bembé ensemble, morphs into a combination of bembé and güiro, and finishes with a mix of bembé and batá accompaniment. Finally, the piece for Oggún features the Iyesá drum ensemble, a fact that should have been highlighted since the Iyesá, a subgroup of the Yoruba, are considered to have distinct religious and musical practices from Santería.<sup>5</sup>

The Bantu/Congo traditions are represented by two pieces, one featuring a ritual associated with the religion known as *Regla de Palo* that consists of a dramatization of Congo slaves honoring their *prenda*, the sacred object/receptacle that contains magical, venerated forces. The second Bantu tradition is the last piece of the performance, an excellent choice for closing the DVD. Makuta is a dance symbolizing an erotic game between a rooster and a hen, and has an incredibly infectious rhythmic matrix that impels one to get up and dance. The unique effect produced by makuta music is obvious when one observes the wide smiles and laughing of AfroCuba's dancers; it is the only dance in which the dancers seem completely unselfconscious about the filming.

One particularly powerful piece in terms of choreography, music, and cinematography is the dance representing *Arará* traditions honoring San Lázaro. This piece is a standout not only because Matanzas known to be the

last bastion of Arará religious practice in Cuba, but also due to the inherently dramatic nature of the dance, which acts out the curative powers of San Lázaro (known as Babalú-Ayé in Lukumí). He is known as the orisha of disease and epidemics, and thus is particularly revered by Afro-Cuban religious practitioners in times of health crisis. Roughly halfway through the group choreography, the dancers fall down ill as San Lázaro enters screaming and foaming at the mouth. There are some wonderful camera shots of the dancers on the ground convulsing in pain. This provides a contrast to the concluding section of the piece, which dramatizes the healing process, where the dancers perform a sort of praise dance on their knees. Another piece that leaves a lasting impression is the dance associated with Abakuá, the religious male secret society/brotherhood that is widely practiced in the urban areas of Havana and Matanzas. The performance is exemplary in terms of the quality of the singing and the variety shown in the dances of the four different *iremés*, the “little devils” or hooded figures emblematic of Abakuá dance, each of which has his own personal qualities and characteristic steps.

The DVD of the live rumba concert filmed in Havana showcases the main styles of rumba that AfroCuba de Matanzas has been performing since the group’s inception—yambú matancero (Matanzas-style yambú, also known as rumba matancera), guaguancó matancero, columbia and their trademark batarumba. The first piece, a yambú matancero, is dedicated to famed Afro-Cuban folkloric singer Lázaro Ros, who had passed away only months earlier, and includes traditional refrains from the *coros de clave* repertoire dating back to the turn of the 20th century.<sup>6</sup> The yambú is considered to be the oldest, slowest, and most traditional of all currently performed rumba styles, and is a couple dance that portrays the sensual, but not overtly sexual, relationship between an elderly man and woman. In this piece AfroCuba dancers don *guarachera* costumes made famous in the cabaret rumba performances of the 1920s and 1930s, complete with flamboyant, ruffled sleeves and a very short top exposing the men’s torsos. It is ironic that, despite the widespread condemnation issued by Cuban scholars declaring that cabaret-style rumba was a bastardization and foreign exoticization of a traditional musical style, folkloric groups representing “authentic” rumba have adopted these admittedly silly costumes. The following piece is another yambú matancero, featuring a division of singing duties very common to AfroCuba (and Matanzas-style) rumba: the soloist sings the *diana*, or introductory section, followed by two other singers who perform a harmonized duo during the *canto*, or body of the song, and then the soloist returns for the improvised parts of the *montuno*, or call-and-response section.

Surprisingly there is only one guaguancó presented in the concert. This is very atypical for a rumba event as the guaguancó is by far the most oft-performed style. However, AfroCuba’s tradition-oriented repertoire tends

to include as many yambú matanceros as guaguancós—on this DVD three of the eight tracks represent the former genre—and they always leave room for one or two batarumbas in each performance. There is also one example of the columbia, a solo male dance which has the fastest tempo of the three traditional genres, and which displays the dancer's agility, strength, and/or virility. Matanzas is considered to be a potencia (powerhouse) in columbia performance, and the songs often last anywhere from 15 to 25 minutes. This allows both for several male dancers to exhibit their skills one by one, and for different singers to engage in a battle of wits by improvising lyrics relevant to the current situation/event. Three of AfroCuba's singers take turns at "improvising" (many use stock phrases from within the repertoire), including a veteran female singer. After a short choreographed routine with some acrobatics, the four male dancers and one female dancer each takes a turn as soloist, demonstrating that women are increasingly asserting themselves within a male-dominated genre.

There are three batarumbas presented on the DVD, one of which is listed as an "extra track." Conceptually, batarumba involves a high degree of polyrhythm and timbral density, as it combines the three conga drums of different pitch ranges used in rumba percussion with three double-headed batá drums, each of which is tuned in a specific register and played with a combination of hand strokes so as to achieve different types of tones. Unfortunately there has been a longstanding and oft-reified simplification of batarumba's musical components in published mentions of the style, asserts that batarumba is characterized by a mix of batá rhythms with guaguancó. This account overlooks the fact that the conga drums are not always playing a guaguancó rhythm, and that AfroCuba also incorporates rhythmic elements and instruments from the comparsa (Cuban carnival music) tradition, including cowbell rhythms and the large bombo drum. The pieces presented here are not only a tribute to AfroCuba's innovating impulses. They also demonstrate that discussing this group merely as conservative tradition-bearers does not do justice to the collective creative talent of the musicians, whose idea of fusing rumba and batá drumming has been appropriated by many folkloric and popular groups. It is no coincidence that the batarumbas often provoke the most crowd participation at AfroCuba concerts, as is evidenced here. After all, who wouldn't want to dance with this infectious combination of rhythms?

Finally, a few comments on the cinematographical aspects and sound quality of the two DVDs. Both aspects are noticeably superior in the folkloric DVD as compared to the rumba concert, presumably because the first was filmed in a much more controlled atmosphere than is possible for a live concert. The filming of the rumba DVD seems to over-emphasize close-ups and footwork. More wide-perspective shots showing the physical relationship of the stage/patio to the entire audience would have provided a

more holistic viewing experience. The folkloric DVD, on the other hand, presents a wonderful mix of wide pan shots, where the whole ensemble is visible, and close-ups that focus on dancers' or musicians' intricate movements. Weaver and the group made a lovely decision to film the pieces in different sites in Matanzas, which gives the viewer a feel for the locale that has nourished AfroCuba's career. The Congo and a few of the Lukumí pieces were filmed at the Castillo San Severino, a colonial fortress and historical site of the slave trade in Matanzas. Both the Ochún and Yemayá pieces were filmed at the sea, an obvious choice as both of these orishas "own" natural elements related to water—the former is the deity of all sweet waters, while the latter is the goddess of the sea and all salt water sources. I have seen other performance DVDs where this type of "in situ" footage came off as cheesy and clichéd, but the location choices here seem very natural, and contribute to the narratives performed by the various dances and dramatizations.

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#### Notes

1. The first term refers to the name of the African ethnic group while the second refers to the Cuban terminology for each of these groups. It should be stressed that these terms are widely considered to refer to meta-ethnic groups, as categories such as "Yoruba" or "Bantu" subsume many distinct African ethnic groups.

2. Instituted in 2004, the specific policies of the Bush administration that negatively affected international exposure included the systematic denial of travel visas for Cuban artists to perform in the United States, and the harsh restrictions and crackdowns on U.S. citizens' travel to the island by Cuban-Americans and Cuban immigrants, in addition to U.S. citizens. The Obama administration has indicated a willingness to restore a certain level of diplomatic relations with the Cuban government, evidenced by its quick repeal of the Bush administration's severe restrictions on Cuban Americans and immigrants traveling to the island and sending money to relatives. Although Obama's presidency seems to be signaling a more open and relaxed foreign policy toward Cuba, the President has yet to address the increasing calls both from American citizens and members of Congress of both parties to end the travel ban and the embargo altogether. Internal travel restrictions imposed by the Cuban government on their citizens constitute another hindrance for Cuban artists wishing to tour the United States.

3. In Cuban musicology, "rumba" refers to a generic complex that includes several different styles or genres. The three traditional styles still performed today are yambú, guaguancó, and columbia.

4. For example, see Acosta 1991; Alén Rodríguez 1998; Crook 1992; Daniel 1995; León 1991; and Urfé 1984.

5. The only remaining active Iyesá cabildo is in the city of Matanzas (Delgado 2001), and AfroCuba is perhaps the only folkloric group that owns a set of Iyesá

drums. Iyesá is also performed often by Havana-based folkloric and rumba groups, but they generally transfer the rhythms to the batá drums.

6. Coros de clave (literally, “clave choirs”) were groups of singers that would circulate in the streets of Havana and Matanzas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly during the Christmas holidays, competing with groups from rival neighborhoods. Coro de clave repertoire and vocal style are considered to be an important predecessor of rumba guaguancó. For more information see Leon 1984.

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