

Recording Reviews

Andres Chacón y Iré Iré: Tambor Lukumí: Música Afro-Cubana. 2006.

Recorded by Mario de Juan and Micheal Casey. Middle Path Media, website: www.middlepathmedia.com, MPM003. Three compact discs. Booklet (29 pp.) in English and Spanish by Ivor Miller, with color photographs, and Spanish translation by José Vicente Argüello.

Designed to pay homage to master Afro-Cuban sacred drummer Andrés Chacón, percussionist Mario de Juan has produced a three-CD set called *Tambor Lukumí: Música Afro-Cubana* featuring the performance by Chacón and his group Iré Iré of the Lukumí (Yoruba-derived) *batá* drum tradition. The recordings were made by de Juan and Micheal Casey in April and October 2000, just a year before Chacón's death, in the Pogolotti neighborhood of Marianao, one of the fifteen municipalities that make up the metropolitan area of Havana. The Yoruba-derived Cuban Lukumí tradition, popularly known as Santería, boasts the greatest variety of all Afro-Cuban sacred traditions in terms of the diverse instrumental ensembles used to accompany song and ceremonies. These include the *batá* drums, the most revered Lukumí instrumental ensemble; the *güiro* ensemble, characterized by the use of three *sbékeres* (hollowed out gourds covered in beads), a cowbell and one or two conga drums; the *bembé* drums; and the *Iyesá* drums, associated with the religious and musical practices of the *Iyesá*, a sub-group of Yoruba peoples whose traditions are related to those of Lukumí in many ways. While the first two CD's present *batá* drumming, the third offers a sort of hodgepodge of Afro-Cuban sacred practices.

Tambor Lukumí represents the sacred music of three of the four principal African ethnic groups brought to Cuba during the transatlantic slave trade: the Yoruba or Lukumí in Cuban terminology (from present-day southwestern Nigeria), the Calabar or Carabalí (from southeastern Nigeria), and the Dahomey or Arará (from present-day Benin). Conspicuously missing from this presentation is an example of the Regla de Palo sacred drumming tradition, derived from the Bantu or Congo peoples, and perhaps the second most popular religion in Cuba after Lukumí. This lacuna reinforces the all-too-common

1 tendency in Cuban music scholarship and folkloric media to underestimate
 2 the influence and widespread practice of Bantu-derived traditions, despite
 3 the incredibly important role they have played in the emergence of Cuban
 4 secular and popular musics, and the fact that the largest group of Africans
 5 brought to Cuba during slavery derived from this meta-ethnic group. One
 6 reason for the relative disregard for and lack of high esteem accorded to
 7 Bantu-derived sacred music and worship practices relates to the fact that they
 8 are often considered to be less complex, and therefore less sophisticated,
 9 than Yoruba-derived religious traditions.

10 The first CD begins with a piece for Eleguá, the *orisha* (Yoruba deity) of
 11 the crossroads who opens and closes opportunities, and who is always the
 12 first to be saluted in a ceremony. As is customary of all Lukumí songs, there
 13 are various *coros* (choruses or refrains) and *toques* (rhythms) associated
 14 with each orisha and performed within one track or song. Their lengths
 15 can vary and it is up to the *akpon* (lead singer) to decide when to change
 16 the *coro*, which may or may not necessitate a change of *toque*. I can only
 17 assume that it is Chacón who plays the *iyá*, the “mother” or lead drum of
 18 the batá ensemble that is constituted by three double-headed hourglass-
 19 shaped drums. The other two drums are the *itótole* (middle drum), and
 20 the *okónkolo* (small drum). The second track is dedicated to Ogún, the
 21 fierce orisha of war and iron, and, following the traditional order for salut-
 22 ing the orishas, the third track is for Ochosi, the hunter. The fourth track is
 23 for Babalu-aye, who is paradoxically known both as the orisha of disease/
 24 epidemics and as having the strongest curative powers. Babalu-aye, who is
 25 syncretized with the Catholic saint San Lázaro, is widely revered both by
 26 Afro-Cuban religious practitioners and Catholics. The fifth track honors
 27 Obatalá, the deity of wisdom and purity and the next major orisha in the
 28 sequence of salutations. The sixth track constitutes an interesting choice as
 29 it is for Olokún, an orisha who is rarely honored on recordings of Lukumí
 30 music, which tend to favor the more well-known and popular deities. Olokún
 31 is considered to be a mysterious orisha who is associated with the depths
 32 of the ocean, and is sometimes discussed as a particular *camino* (aspect or
 33 manifestation) of Yemayá, the major orisha associated with motherhood and
 34 the ocean. The *Atlas of Folkloric and Popular Music Instruments of Cuba*
 35 (Elí Rodríguez 1997) asserts that Olokún is also associated with the Middle
 36 Passage, as so many Africans died aboard slave ships bound for the Americas
 37 and were thrown into the ocean. The song for Olokún also constitutes a
 38 surprising choice for a CD set that represents Havana-style batá drumming,
 39 because this orisha is supposedly revered in the contemporary context only
 40 in the province of Matanzas (Delgado 2001), known by many as the “cradle
 41 of Afro-Cuban culture.” The last song, which is by far the longest track for
 42 any one orisha on this CD set, is dedicated to the most famous male orisha
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within the Lukumí pantheon, Changó, who is the deity of virility, thunder, fire, and the batá drums. Interestingly, this is the only track on the first CD that features both of the “all-purpose” batá toques (rhythms that can be used to sing for any orisha): *ñongo* and *chachalokafún*.

The second CD begins with two rather short tracks for Eleguá and Ogún respectively, followed by Omolode, which is a rhythm “used here to evoke Ochosi” (25), although this toque is also strongly associated with Yemayá. The next three tracks respectively honor Osain, the orisha of herbs and plant-based medicine, Ibeji, the twin orishas of the Yoruba pantheon, and Oba, the orisha of rivers and marital fidelity. The seventh track is for Ochún, the very popular orisha of sweet waters and romantic/erotic love who is syncretized with la Virgen de la Caridad (the Virgin of Charity) and considered to be the patron saint of Cuba. The last track is dedicated to Odua, the “ancestor of Yoruba people” (*ibid.*).

The last CD in the set presents various Afro-Cuban sacred musics, including two examples of güiro, one example of Dahomey-derived Arará music, one of Calabar-derived Abakuá music, and the performance of *oru seco*, the long rhythmic salute to all the orishas that features only the three batá drums (no song) and that opens all *tambores de fundamento* (Lukumí ceremonies accompanied by batá drums). The placement of the *oru seco* as the first track on the third CD seems rather peculiar since it signals the commencement of a ceremony; it would seem a more logical choice to have positioned it at the beginning of the first CD. Furthermore, I found it strange for the last CD in the set, which presumably represents other, non-batá sacred practices, to include an *oru seco*, the goal of which is to initiate communication between the batá drummers and the orishas. Following the *oru seco* are güiros for Eleguá and Ogún respectively. Given the fact that the liner notes mention the association of this instrumental ensemble specifically with Ochún, I believe a recording for this orisha would have constituted a more consistent choice.

Two tracks representing non-Lukumí traditions round out this three-CD set. The song representing the Dahomey-derived Arará tradition honors Babalu-aye/San Lázaro, whose name is Asojano in the Arará language; as discussed in the CD’s liner notes, Arará has many links to Lukumí worship and deities. However, unlike Lukumí drumming, which is executed only with the hands, Arará is played by striking the drums with sticks. In his interview with scholar Ivor Miller, quoted in the liner notes, Chacón asserts that he owns the only set of consecrated Arará drums extant in Havana, which are over one hundred years old. Challenging the widespread assertion that the Matanzas province is the last bastion of Arará religious practice in contemporary Cuba (Vinueza 1989; Vélez 2000), he states that there are many Havana natives initiated into Arará. The last track is an Abakuá song, representing the ritual music of the Calabar-deried male secret society/brotherhood, whose initiates

1 are concentrated in the cities of Havana, Matanzas, and Cárdenas (a port city
 2 in the Matanzas province). As noted by Miller in the liner notes, many male
 3 Lukumí practitioners are also initiated in Abakuá.

4 It is clear from the beginning of the first CD that the musicians on this
 5 recording do not form part of the world of *el arte*, the professional artistic
 6 sphere. Rather, they would probably belong to the category of musicians
 7 working *en la calle* (in the street), i.e., those who do not have professional
 8 status and who earn their living informally, outside of the realm of the state
 9 cultural apparatus. Professional status can only be bestowed by *empresas*,
 10 state-run artistic agencies responsible for evaluating musicians to determine
 11 whether or not they are deserving of this title. Many batá and güiro groups
 12 who make their living principally by playing for Lukumí ceremonies do not
 13 have professional status, although there are also many musicians in *el arte*
 14 who play for rituals to earn supplemental income. The main element that
 15 distinguishes the musicians on this CD set as non-professional, in contrast
 16 to recordings of similar repertoire made by professional folkloric groups, is
 17 the chorus, the back-up singers who alternate with the lead singer in call-
 18 and-response form. On many tracks, the various singers in the chorus do not
 19 sing in unison, and most songs can be characterized as having a heterophonic
 20 texture. In some cases—the track for Ochún, the güiro for Eleguá, and the
 21 Abakuá—the chorus is quite out of tune.

22 This commentary is intended not to make a value judgment of the vocal
 23 performance on the CD set, but instead to highlight the different aesthetic
 24 criteria that govern the performance of Afro-Cuban sacred music in a ritual
 25 context as opposed to a folkloric context, i.e., a public, non-ceremonial per-
 26 formance. For example, in professional performances there is an expectation
 27 that singers will adhere to certain European-derived standards of musical com-
 28 petence, such as singing in tune and, in some cases, harmonizing. In *la calle*,
 29 however, the definition of a good singer has much less to do with melodic
 30 beauty and intonation, and is measured more in terms of the breadth of their
 31 repertoire knowledge and their ability to improvise. Furthermore, the most
 32 important factor for a successful ritual ceremony—apart from the invaluable
 33 role of the drummers—is maximum participation by the religious attendees,
 34 which creates ritual energy and facilitates the bodily possession of one or
 35 more of them by an orisha for the purposes of communicating directly with
 36 other practitioners. In this context, there is no “official” chorus—for the chorus
 37 is the group of religious practitioners—and consequently, no expectation of
 38 harmonic consonance. In other words, the vocal performance on this CD is a
 39 good example of what one might find at a Lukumí ritual. Also identifying the
 40 recording as a non-professional endeavor is the fact that the CD was made in
 41 Chacón’s home, and not in a studio. This results in some extraneous noise,
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such as the presence of a child's voice at the beginning of the third CD and the crowing of a rooster heard at the end of the güiro for Eleguá.

The 29-page booklet included with the CD set includes liner notes written by cultural historian Ivor Miller, who has conducted and published extensive research on Afro-Cuban religions and who has recently published a book on the Abakuá secret society (2009). Also included are a Spanish translation by José Vicente Argüello, and several photographs taken by Mario de Juan and Michael Casey. As noted by Miller in his notes, there are six color photographs featuring Chacón's *bandeles*, the "skirts" that cover the batá drums during a ceremony, each representing a different orisha. There are also two photos of Chacón and his fellow drummers playing batá, one in color on the back cover that was presumably taken during the recording sessions, and one black and white photo inside the booklet that was taken in 1959. Rather than providing the customary historical narrative about the different sacred traditions represented on the CDs, Miller's notes rely heavily on two interviews he conducted with Chacón in 1997, which were revised by the percussionist in 2000. Miller's tone is infused with religious metaphors, such as the statement that Chacón "became a conduit for the transmission of this lore to future generations" (4). His narrative also betrays a certain preoccupation with purity/authenticity, particularly when he states that the CD set presents examples of "traditions with direct links to MotherAfrica" (ibid.). Miller reproduces several long quotes from his interviews with Chacón, which focus on his lineage as a *batalero* (batá drummer), particularly his training under famed ritual percussionist Pablo Roche. Chacón recounts the genealogy of his consecrated batá drum set, passed down to him by Roche, asserting that it was the first set of batá drums constructed in Cuba in the 1830s by Africans.

Miller's final narrative section is entitled "Global batá" and concerns the ever-increasing dissemination and popularity of the Lukumí drumming practice and religion, both within Cuba, in locales like the eastern city of Santiago that are not historically associated with Lukumí practice, and abroad. Chacón views this as a possibly damaging trend in terms of the maintenance of tradition, stating that younger bataleros no longer ask permission from their *padrinos* (religious godfathers) to make a new set of batá drums, and that even the older bataleros (himself included) do not have the necessary ritual knowledge to construct new sets. Chacón's last comment is a telling one in the context of contemporary Cuba: he states that while in the past bataleros formed a brotherhood, where everyone knew and respected each other and the *fundamento* (the ritual precepts), it is no longer this way "por la necesidad de dinero" (21). Unfortunately, Miller translates this last phrase of Chacón's narrative as "because of necessity" (11), omitting the final part that refers to money (*dinero*), and without explaining what Chacón means.

1 The notion of *necesidad* (need or, in this case, economic lack) has taken
 2 on a vital significance for all Cubans since the onset of the dire economic
 3 crisis in the early 1990s that was precipitated by the fall of the Soviet Bloc,
 4 when Cuba's economy contracted by 35–40% (de la Fuente 2001). Thus,
 5 what Chacón is alluding to is the increasing commercialization of all aspects
 6 of Santería and the fact that many religious practitioners, governed
 7 by *necesidad*, “cut corners” in order to facilitate foreigners' initiation into
 8 the religion and thus provide them with badly needed income. While the
 9 increasing impact of economic need on the maintenance and transmission
 10 of Afro-Cuban religious traditions may be a source of anxiety for some elders
 11 and ethnographers, it is a pervasive reality in the context of post-Soviet Cuba
 12 that cannot be ignored.

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 29 **Ethiopia: Bagana Songs.** 2006. Recorded by Stephanie Weisser. VDE-GALLO/
 30 Musee d'ethnographie Geneve. VDE-CD-1206. One compact disc. Booklet
 31 (28 pp.) with photographs and notes in English & French.

32 *Ethiopia: Bagana Songs* is a collection of sacred and semi-sacred songs of the
 33 Amhara people of Ethiopia, performed with the large ten-stringed lyre known
 34 as the *bagana*. Recorded over the course of four research trips to Ethiopia
 35 by ethnomusicologist Stephanie Weisser between 2002 and 2005, as part of a
 36 project sponsored by UNESCO, the recordings on this CD beautifully capture
 37 the intricate melodic interchange between voice and lyre that characterize
 38 this music, and testify to the skill still cultivated by contemporary musicians
 39 in continuing this ancient and sacred tradition. The quality and scope of
 40 Weisser's liner notes is impressive, and give a thorough introduction to this
 41 calm, quiet, but powerful music.
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