

JESUS PEREZ



"Ricardo Carballo tocando bata en su tumba." 1985

AND THE TRANSCULTURATION OF THE CUBAN BATÁ DRUM¹

by Ivor Miller

Because of his comprehensive efforts to document and interpret Cuba's multi-faceted popular culture, Fernando Ortiz y Fernández became known as the "Third Discoverer of Cuba." Ortiz learned much by maintaining lasting relationships with leading practitioners of various African religions. Among them, Jesús Pérez Puentes was one of Don Fernando's main informants for the study of Lukumí music, derived from the Yorùbá of West Africa and maintained by their descendants as the Santería religion.

After several years of researching the accomplishments of Jesús, in part by interviewing those who worked closely with him, I conclude that he was a primary figure in the transculturation of the Cuban batá drum. During his lifetime, from 1915 to 1985, batá went from being an obscure instrument, used exclusively in Santería ceremonies, to being a secular instrument used throughout popular music in Cuba, and around the globe. The batá began as a local phenomenon of Havana and Matanzas, where it was recreated by Yorùbá migrants in the 1830s. It is used today in Santería ceremonies across the planet. Jesús played a pivotal role in these transitions.

Jesús played the tres, flute, bass and trumpet. He was also a dancer and singer. But he was famous for his mastery of batá. A religious man, he was a mason, an Abakuá (a secret society derived from southeastern Nigeria), and a *santero* with Changó "made" (a Santería initiate consecrated to Changó, thunder deity). It is well known that Changó is "king of the batá." Not surprisingly, many important Omo Añá, or "children of the sacred drum," have been "sons of Changó." Yet Jesús stands out among them. As an Olu Añá, or "keeper of the drum," Jesús's ritual Lukumí name was Obá-Illú.² Obá is 'king', and Ilu has two meanings, depending on its pronunciation. As Rogelio Martínez Furé (artistic director of the National Folklore Ensemble of Cuba) told me:

There aren't sufficient words to detail his stature: Oba llú: King of the people [the Santería community], or Oba llu: King of the drum . . . both epithets serve to crown his regal head.

As a young man Jesús was fortunate to have studied with the masters of this culture. His teachers were essential links to the orthodox Santería and Abakuá

traditions that flourished in nineteenth century Cuba through West African slaves brought to work in the sugar industry. Notable among them was Pablo Roche, master *batalero* (batá player), "son" of Changó and Abakuá leader of Guanabacoa; Maximiliano Ordaz, singer and diviner for Santería, Abakuá leader and godfather to Jesús.

Jesús was exceptional for his leadership in defending Afro-Cuban culture by performing and teaching it to others. Among his achievements are playing batá in Fernando Ortiz's first conference on Afro-Cuban culture in 1937 in Havana.³ Jesús enjoyed a long and consistent relationship with Ortiz, enabling his studies of the Cuban batá, as well as Abakuá music, as found in the five volume masterpiece "Los instrumentos de la música afrocubana." Amado de Jesús Dedeu, a student of Jesús, described the background:

"Jesús told me a lot about the first conferences with Fernando Ortiz. Pablo Roche played the lyá [the lead drum], Aguedito played the Itótele [the second drum], and Jesús the Okónkolo [the smallest], illustrating the theories of Ortiz with their musicianship.⁴ The three major informants for Ortiz were Jesús Pérez, Santos Ramírez "El niño," and Agustín Pina "Flor de Amor" (who was Abakuá and a rumba player). Jesús told me that on Ortiz's birthdays, intellectuals and politicians would come to greet him in the Palacio de Aldama, on the corner of Reina and Amistad streets, where he had an office. On some occasions, when Fernando was in his office with these people waiting for him below, he would tell the porter, "If Jesús, Agustín, or Santos 'El niño' arrive, tell them to come upstairs." Thus they had a great fellowship with Fernando, and contributed much to his work."

From the first conference with Ortiz onwards, Jesús acted as a bridge between the esoteric traditions of his local religious communities, and the public sphere of national culture. In 1937 he played batá with the orchestra of Gilberto Valdés, and in the 1940s with Obdulio Morales, both of whom sought to integrate Afro-Cuban liturgical ideas into popular music (cf. Ortiz 1937). In this decade, Jesús taught and performed with renowned singer Mercedes Valdés. Mercedesita told me:

"For the first time in Cuba, I created a program of Yorùbá chants and prayers on radio Suaritos, which became famous throughout the island. We performed these chants and prayers with their authentic drum rhythms. I learned all this from Jesús and Trinidad [Torregrosa], the percussionists who accompanied me. They guided me, and if I had doubts, I consulted with them. Doctor Ortiz, after listening to the program, asked Jesús and Trinidad to bring me to his house so he could greet me. When they brought me to his house, on the corner of L and 27 streets, he opened the door. Being surprised by my small size, he gave me the nickname "the little aché." [Aché is 'power' in the Lukumí language].

In 1955, Jesús worked in Venezuela, in the show of Havana's cabaret Montmartre with legendary conga drummer Tata Güines. As Tata Güines told me:

There is much to say about Jesús Pérez, yet little has been said. I think that when one mentions his name, one mentions the master of the batá in Cuba. I think that the batá player who doesn't mention Jesús Pérez doesn't mention his own drum. Jesús is eternally present, and when one speaks of percussion, one must speak of Jesús Pérez. It was he who opened the breach, the path to follow.

In the late 1950s, he created Afro-Cuban shows in cabarets like Tropicana, the Riviera, Sans Souci. In 1959, he traveled to Mexico with his show "Oba Kosó Batá" (The batá of Changó) where he recorded an album of traditional Lukumí and popular music.⁵

Returning to Havana, he acted as informant to Dr. Argeliers Leon in the National Theater in 1959-60. In 1961, Jesús played a leading role as a founder of Danza Moderna by selecting many of its members.⁶ In 1962 he co-founded the Conjunto Folkórico Nacional, where he again helped select members, and constructed their drums. Here, he acted as informant to Rogelio Martínez-Furé for twenty years, and toured the planet performing with the Conjunto.

In 1977, when he participated in FESTAC '77 with Danza Nacional de Cuba, he became the first person to carry consecrated Cuban batá drums to Nigeria. There he played batá before the Aláàfin of Òyó, a traditional leader



Jesús, Mercedita y Barreto en su casa con su tambores de fundamento atrás. Early 1980s.

in Changó's historic homeland, who commented on the resemblance to Yorubá sacred music. Batá were created and maintained since the slave trade in Cuba, and Jesús became the first person in the Americas known to bring the batá back to its homeland.⁷ Later that year (1977) he traveled to París with Danza Nacional, where they performed in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

As a member of "Los Amigos" de Fran Emilio, he was the first to bring the batá into the Cuban *descarga* (jam) sessions, demonstrating the capability of the batá to create a musical dialogue with the *quinto* (conga drum) of Tata Güines.⁸ In 1968, he co-founded the group Orú, later performing with them around the world. Composer and guitarist Sergio Vitier told me:

"Jesús had the rare capacity to integrate himself into different worlds; he knew how to bring his talents even into the world of classical music. Cuban music has two phases: in the first, Lukumí culture did not enter into the language of popular music. After 1968, when we formed the group Orú, we began its introduction into popular music, which today has become the rage."⁹

In addition to his performances, Jesús recorded music for several films, including *Obá-Ilú; Una pelea cubana contra los demonios; Shangai; and De cierta manera*.¹⁰

As a teacher, he contributed to the process of transculturation by teaching white students. Before the 1960s, whites were not taught batá, but Jesús broke the mold, nurturing students like

Amado de Jesús, currently director of the rumba group Clave y Guaguancó. This is only one way Jesús helped bring batá into Cuban national culture. Whereas in the nineteenth century it was considered an African drum, and in the early twentieth an Afro-Cuban drum, today it is viewed as a Cuban instrument, integrated into all forms of musical expression as a symbol of cubanía (cubanness). Even leaders of the Nueva Trova (the New Song Movement), Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés have used batá in their music. As Amado de Jesús told me:

"Jesús wanted drummers who were serious and responsible. Many wanted to play with him, but he wouldn't let them to because they were "puppets" [informal]. Many of the young drummers liked to invent and improvise with the batá rhythms, and Jesús strongly rejected this. He told them to play within the tradition, and not to invent. When he went to ceremonies and heard the young drummers improvising, he would get up and leave."

By respecting the ceremonial traditions of Santería, even while being innovative with its music in secular contexts, Jesús built bridges in a way that eventually earned him the respect of orthodox religious leaders, many of whom first condemned him. We know he earned their respect because his funerary rites were performed with the participation of hundreds of religious elders.

The importance of well attended funerary rites as a symbol of respect is found throughout the African diaspora, and Cuba is not an exception. Martínez-

Furé (1999: 15) wrote: "To die of natural causes at an advanced age, leaving behind numerous progeny, like a 'tree bent from the weight of its fruit,' and in harmony with the divinities and the ancestors; to be buried with the performance of all the rites that mark the tradition -- which permit one to enter Orun (the other world), where one is reunited with the ancestors of one's lineage to be later reincarnated -- constitutes for the Yorubá *the good death*."¹¹

Popular poet Eloy Machado "El Ámbia" (1993: 21-23) wrote "Oba Ylu," dedicated: "to Jesús Pérez, with all the love that he merited":

... Tocaba con sentido poético:
 ... He played with poetic feeling:
 su verso
 his verse
 era el sonido del tambor,
 was the sound of the drum,
 yorubizaba el cuerpo,
 it yourbized the body,
 la vida,
 life,
 era el sol del tambor,
 it was the sun of the drum,
 la luna del mayor,
 the moon of the elder [lyá drum],
 lucero batable.
 drummable star.
 Y se canto la rumba
 And rumba was chanted
 tocando en su ataúd.
 While playing on his coffin.
 Era mi amigo
 He was my friend
 y yo lo llevaba.
 And I carried him [to the grave].
 Si un peso tenía
 If he had one peso

medio peso me daba. . . .
he would give me half. . . .

The extraordinary outpouring of praise to Jesús Pérez reflects not only his stature as a charismatic individual, but also the fundamental importance of African-derived drumming traditions and their caretakers to the identity of many contemporary Cubans.

Many of his students and colleagues have maintained the memory of Jesús alive in their own ways, by Danza Nacional's recording the LP "Homenaje a Jesús Pérez"; by director "Goyo" Hernández naming his folklore group with Jesús's Lukumí name "Oba-Ilu." I hope that my forthcoming book on Jesús Pérez and the history of the Batá drum in the Americas will encourage Cuban institutions to celebrate his lasting contributions to the national culture. To this end, I thank Miguel Barnet (president of the Fernando Ortiz Foundation), who told me:

"I think that Jesús Pérez is a symbol of Cuban popular culture. As is Lázaro Ros, as was Mercedita Valdés, who learned much from Jesús Pérez. All batá drummers have to pay homage to Jesús Pérez - Oba Ilú, the greatest of all batá players I have known in my life. And all this was nurtured here, in the house of Fernando Ortiz. Don Fernando had tremendous respect for Jesús, Mercedita, Pablo Roche, and Maximiliano Ordaz. This is what I can say about my great friend Jesús Pérez."

Beyond this, I hope my study will help participants in the now global practice of batá drumming to study the works and legacy of this teacher. Jesús left still another contribution, a nearly 400 page manuscript on batá history and techniques with musical annotations by a classically trained composer.¹² I aim to publish this work with a large archive of photographs and extensive interviews with his colleagues.

Many genres of Cuban popular music are based on the performance of complex rhythms originating in West and Central Africa, later transformed in Cuba. Due to a past of oppression and discrimination, the great majority of men and women who helped create Cuban music from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries are unknown to the present generation. We are fortunate then to have detailed information about Jesús Pérez and his colleagues, so that their contributions

will be understood and celebrated in the future by students around the world. As Cuba is well known internationally as a source of musical wealth, to laud its leading musicians like Jesús Pérez is to celebrate the society from which he came.

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PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

1. a & b) "Ricardo Carballo plays batá at the tomb of Jesús Pérez." 1985. Old Cemetery of Guanabacoa. Archives of Ricardo Carballo.
2. Jesús at home with Mercedita and Barreto; fundamento drums at back. Early 1980s. Author's archives.
3. Tropicana nightclub, 1950s. Archives of Ricardo Carballo. "Lulu Yenkori group." Left to Right: "Papo," Luisa Barroso, Ricardo Carballo, Mercedita Valdés, Jesús Pérez, Ramiro Hernández. Fernando Ortiz interpreted "Luku Yenkori" as "chants, rhythms and dances," using the term for one of his conferences with Mercedita Valdés (p.c. Natalia Bolívar, 1999). It appears that M. Valdés used this title for her own group.

NOTES

1. This article is based on a presentation delivered on November 27, 1999, at an international conference sponsored by the Fundación de Fernando Ortiz in Havana, when the author was a Scholar-in-Residence at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Research for this article was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities through the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's Scholar-in-Residence Program.
2. There are three categories of initiation for batá drummers. The first is having one "hands washed" (*las manos lavados*), a ceremony that enables men to play the Añá drums. The second is called Omo Añá, referred to as "sworn to the drum" (*jurado al tambor*). Literally "Child of the deity Añá," the Orisha (divinity) of the drum, this ceremony is akin to initiation into Santería, that is, it is a complex, seven day ceremony. Omo Añá are able to learn secret batá rituals. The third and maximum level is "Olu Añá," where an



Foto en el Tropicana, 1950s

Omo Añá receives a set of batá Añá in order to be its caretaker. As an Orisha, Añá does not have an "owner," but a caretaker. Olu Añá are popularly called "owners of the drum" (*dueños del tambor*), but they are actually considered its "slaves." During ceremony Olu Añá are ritually linked to a particular set of batá drums. If these drums are not cared for properly, the divinity Añá inside them will wither and die. So too, the well-being of its caretaker is thought to be endangered.

3. In an essay about this conference, held on May 30, 1937, Ortiz points out that the batá music heard by the audience would not be "contaminated" by European music, that it would "conserve its ancestral purity." He wrote: "In Cuba, these religious chants of the *yorubá* are conserved orthodoxly and purely . . . because of their esoteric isolation, their African orthodoxy has not yet been transformed by the influence of whites." Ortiz expressed his hope that this batá music would contribute to "the glory of the national music of Cuba, and its repeated universal contributions [a reference to the then international rage of Cuban popular music]" (Ortiz 1938). Ortiz was aware that his efforts would encourage the transculturation of the batá into national culture. It was Jesús Pérez who took the lead role in the actual process.
4. In Ortiz's first conference in 1937, Pablo Roche used a set of consecrated batá drums inherited from his father. On this occasion, the musicians were Pablo Roche on *Iyá*; Águedo Morales on *Itótele* and Jesús Pérez on *Okónkolo* (Ortiz 1938: 93-95).
5. Oba Kosó Batá literally could be interpreted as "The batá of Şàngó (The king of Kòso, or the King who did not hang)." The phrase "Oba Kòso" in Yorùbá has two interpretations: 1) Oba a Kòso "The Oba [ruler] of Kòso ["the compound where the political head of the Şàngó cult

lives in Oyo]" (Abimbólá 1976: 247)] and 2) Oba kòso: "The Oba did not hang [himself]" — a reference to a legend where Şàngó disappears from the tree where he had committed suicide and was heard triumphantly thundering from the sky. Thanks to Victor Manfredi for these interpretations.

The Yorùbá language of West Africa has three tones: high, mid and low, indicated by diacritics. Without these, Roman spellings of Yorùbá words would be either ambiguous (out of context) or meaningless. One would be unable to distinguish a town (*ilú*) from percussion (*ilù*). Because the Yorùbá language has many varieties, interpretations between Cuban, Brazilian, and West African usage are often complex. Changó in Cuba is often Şàngó (pronounced Shangó) in West Africa (cf. Abimbólá & Miller).

6. Originally the Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna, later named Danza Nacional de Cuba and today known as Danza Contemporánea.
7. Batá are known as drums of Shango. The name batá is used for drums in Brazilian Candomblé, but these seem to not have a guild tradition and a ritual lineage which are key to the Cuban bata drummers. Recent research, however, has found that "at the oldest shango house of Recife [Brazil] one can still hear a trio of bata drums being played. These well known Yoruba drums, still found today in Cuba and among the Cuban communities in the U.S.A., were believed extinct in Brazil for more than fifty years. Thus, the bata drums which can be heard in our music selection are, most probably, the only ones that can still be found in Brazil" (Carvalho & Segato 1992: 9).
8. The group "Los amigos" performed descargas with Guillermo Barreto on the pailas, "Tata Guines" on the congas, Jesús Pérez on batá (and sometimes with Regino

Jimenez) Jorrín on flute, "Cachaíto" on bass, Frank Emilio on piano, and often with Sergio Vitier on guitar.

9. Cuban popular music has its foundation in rhythms and instruments derived from Kongo (Bantú), such as the Son and the Rumba, as well as in Spanish secular music. Before the group Orú, instruments derived from the Yorùbá (Lukumi) peoples were not widely used. Before Orú there were various attempts to do so, as in the case of Gilberto Valdés, Obdulio Morales, Caturra, Roldán and others, but they had few followers. The name of the group is Orú, but the term is pronounced 'óru' by many professional bataleros, such as in the phrase 'óru seco' (dry óru), which are liturgical batá rhythms performed without chanting.
10. Obá-Ilú." 1985. Documental. Realización: Emilio Oscar Alcalde. 9 minutos. Premio Caracol al mejor Documental en el Festival de Cine UNEAC/1985. "Recoge la vida de un tamborero de batá, Jesús Pérez, Obá-Ilú en lengua Yoruba, uno de los grandes tamboreros de batá de la música afrocubana" (*Catalogo* 1986: 417).
11. "Fallecer de muerte natural muy anciano - o anciana - , dejando tras sí una numerosa prole, como un árbol doblado por el peso de sus frutos,' y en armonía con las divinidades y los ancestros. Ser enterrado tras celebrarse todos los ritos funerarios que marca la tradición, y que le permitan entrar en Orun (el más allá), donde se reúna con los antepasados de su linaje y luego reencarnar, constituye para los yorubá *la buena muerte*."
12. Mr. Juan Elósegui, a musician and pedagogue formerly of the National Symphony of Cuba.