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Author

González, J. Emanuel D.

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PUERTO RICO AND AFRICA: ELEMENTS OF YORUBA CULTURE

By

J. Emanuel D. González

The Puerto Rican culture is the fusion of three civilizations: the indigenous Arawakan, the African and the Iberian. The African influence is more evident in the coastal regions because of the greater quantity of slaves imported to work in the sugarcane plantations. Among the many municipalities along the Puerto Rican shores, Loíza and Guayama are noted for their African-influenced musical and religious traditions. Yoruba influence on the culture of Puerto Rico can be classified in two categories:

- a) Retention of ancient traditions of Yoruba slaves of yesteryear
- b) Influence from other communities and Caribbean nations during recent years.

This second influence is more evident. People from many African ethnic groups were brought to Puerto Rico, but they have lost their national identities, thus forming a new Afro-Hispanic culture in Puerto Rico.¹

HISTORICAL REFERENCES

A document from 1824 states that two ladies of ulló nationality had fled from Don Francisco Cepero's lands.² Dr. Manuel Alvarez Nazario states that ulló is a phonetic variant of the words eyó and oyó, which with the words epá, nagó, lucumí and ajudá were used to denote people of Yoruba origin in Spanish and Portuguese colonies. Oyó was the ancient capital of the Yoruba kingdom.³

In a lecture he gave on Yoruba religion and culture, Professor Wande Abimbola mentioned the Yoruba dish called fufú.⁴ In Puerto Rico, fufú is almost forgotten. This dish was made with plantains, squash and yams. The same word was used for another dish of cornmeal. The word fufú is widely diffused in West Africa.⁵

In his prologue to Ricardo Alegría's work *La Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol en Loíza Aldea*, Fernando Ortiz believed in a possible relation between the vejigante masks used in the St. James festivities at Loíza and Yoruba Egungún masks. Ortiz also believed that the three cofradías or associations that organize these festivities are of African origin. There are three Santiago (St. James) images--one for each cofradía. These are Santiago de los Hombres (men's Santiago), Santiago de

las mujeres (women's Santiago) and Santiaguito de los niños (the children's little Santiago). Ortiz also stated an analogy between the viejo (old man) masks and the elders or ogboni in African societies.⁶

Ricardo Alegría believes that the cult to Santiago is an example of syncretism between Shangó and St. James. Mr. Alegría states that both have similar characteristics and that these similarities made syncretism possible. He writes:

*Entre las culturas Africanas representadas en Puerto Rico por los negros esclavos, la yoruba es la que parece haber dejado mayor influencia. En la religión yoruba se destacan Ogún, dios de la guerra, y Shangó, legendario rey que alcanzó la divinización, convirtiéndose en uno de los dioses más populares. Shangó es para los negros yorubas el dios del rayo, del trueno y de la tempestad, así como poderoso y valiente guerrero. En la escultura yoruba frecuentemente se le presenta como un guerrero a caballo. Estos atributos que los yorubas adjudican a Shangó son muy similares a los de Santiago Matamoros.*⁷

Among the African cultures represented in Puerto Rico by Negro slaves, the Yoruba culture is the one that seems to have left the greatest influence. In the Yoruba religion, Ogún, god of war, has great importance as well as Shangó, a legendary king who reached divinisation, becoming one of the most popular deities. Shangó is for the Yorubas the god of lightning, thunder, and the storm, and is a powerful and brave warrior. In Yoruba sculpture he is frequently depicted as a warrior on horseback. These attributes that the Yoruba believe Shangó has are very similar to those of Santiago Matamoros (St. James the Moor-killer).

While speaking of Yoruba influence in Cuba, Argeliers León states that Negroes incorporated themselves into the fiestas of Corpus Christi with masks and representations. During early Cuban republican times Yoruba cabildos, a form of association to honor an African deity, had one or more silk banners with silver and golden decorations. The home of the cabildo became a type of shrine where representations of African deities were hidden.⁸ This information seems similar to the data on the cofradías in Loíza. Each of Loíza's cofradías have a mantenedora, or keeper, whose home is a "shrine" where an image of Santiago is kept. Each cofradía has a banner. The Corpus Christi fiesta was also celebrated in Loíza and masks were incorporated into these festivities.⁹ Juan Ángel Silén states

that the slave trade in Puerto Rico was different from the other Antilles because of the comparatively low number of slaves that were imported. According to Silén, this occurred because of economic and military reasons. Puerto Rico's economy did not enable the early settlers to buy great numbers of slaves. In 1503, Nicolás Ovando, governor of Hispaniola, asked the King of Spain to limit the importation of Negroes to prevent strong slave rebellions.¹⁰

AFRO-CUBAN MUSICAL CONNECTION

In his thesis on Yoruba influence in Cuban music, Stephen Joseph Loza states:

Yoruba cofradías of black brotherhood were organized according to Spanish political structure. The societies which hoped to preserve their African tradition, were modeled upon and called cabildos, with a presidium of officers and set of rules. Santería, the mixture of African spiritual ideology and Roman Catholicism developed as a result of the rituals and social organization of these cabildos.¹¹

He further notes:

Santería is an evolved form of Cuban religion produced from syncretism between ancient Yoruba rites from West Africa and elements of Catholicism. Yoruba cult arrived...from Nigeria and Dahomey to Cuba during slave traffic, eventually reorganizing sometimes secretly during the latter part of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹²

Santería and commercial popular music from the other Antilles and Hispanic communities of the United States are recent influences from Yoruba culture.¹³ One example of this type of popular music is the following fragment of a guaguancó, a Cuban musical genre, Siete Potencias by Rafael Dávila:¹⁴

*Yemayá, Eleguá, Orulá, Changó, Ogún, Ochún, Obatalá:
Las Siete Potencias del África...*

*Yemayá, Eleguá, Orulá, Changó, Ogún, Ochún, Obatalá:
The Seven African Powers...*

THE MUSICAL BOW

The musical bow can be found throughout Africa, as observed in Hugh Tracy's *Handbook for Librarians*. According to Nketia, the musical bow is the instrument that has the greatest diffusion in Africa. There are several types of the bow cordophones:

the earth bow, mouth bow, and bows with gourd resonators, among others.¹⁵

The earth bow, or arc-en-terre, is composed of a wooden rod stuck in the earth with a stretched string attached from the upper end of the rod to a sounding-board or resonator that is fixed to the ground. Bebey states that this type of bow is used for magic practices in Africa.¹⁶ In Ankole (Uganda)¹⁷ and Ghana,¹⁸ this bow is used to accompany singing as a toy instrument. The earth bow is also found in Cuba, where it is known as tumbandera.¹⁹ Vega Drouet states that the late Don Castor Ayala, Loíza's renowned craftsman, informed of the use of the tumbandero in Loíza.²⁰

There exists in Ankole a combination of mouth bow with a non-attached resonator. This chordophone is known there as ekidongo.²¹ It has three sections of the same string that sound independently.²² This data is worth noting, for Don Adolfo Pica Guadalupe states that the late Don Juan Sabater sometimes had two or three strings on his banye.²³ However, more information is needed to confirm this data.

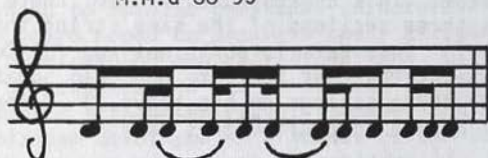
In his work on Amerindian musical cultures of Mexico, Pablo Castellanos states that the use of the mouth as a resonator for the musical bow among the modern Amerindian peoples in this Latin-American country is not indigenous to Mexico and must be considered as a post-Cortesian influence because this technique is solely African and was introduced into Andalusia by the Moors. In Puerto Rico, a form of mouth-bow was used in the past as stated by Doña Olimpia de León vda. de Robles. Doña Olimpia claims to have seen Don Juan Sabater, a bomba drummer of Guayama, play this instrument around 1911. Doña Coca, as this informant is called, danced to the music of this chordophone during her childhood. This instrument was called banyao. A stick was used to activate the string and the performer's mouth was used as the resonator.²⁴

Don Adolfo Pica Guadalupe, known as el Negro Bucá, is called "el rey de la pandereta," king of the pandereta,* claims that the musical bow played by Don Juan Sabater was about two feet long and was made of a winding plant called pegapalo. Bucá calls this chordophone the banye. Señor Pica also states that banye was another stringed instrument made from a large calabash with a wooden face and short neck. This informant saw this instrument in Patillas. This chordophone was used in performing the seis, aguinaldo, and baquiné. Bucá says that the banye had three strings but that later, three more were added.²⁵

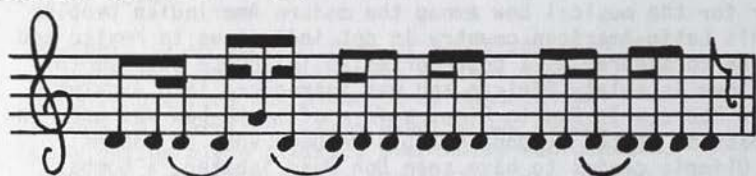
*Pandereta: a tambourine without crotales; this membranophone is used in the genre known as plena.

Don Víctor Rivera states that he played the banyao or mouth-bow while living in Salinas. In the same pueblo, Don Víctor also witnessed the performance of the banyao by somebody called Hermenegildo Dávila. The banyao was a bow made of a piece of higuera branch. The string of this chordophone was made of palm leaf filaments. One thin rod was used to strike the string while a thicker stick was held in the other hand to stop the string. The mouth of the performer was used as the resonator. This instrument was utilized in a game involving hiding a needle or any small object. The searcher of the hidden prenda or jewel would be clued by the performer of the banyao. The hidden object would be placed on somebody's clothing. When the searcher was far from the object, the banyao musician would play:

M.M.d-88-95



If by any chance the seeker got near the hidden object, the banyao player would change his pattern:



To make these musical illustrations, Don Víctor imitated the sound of the banyao orally.²⁶

The words banye and banyao resemble the word banjo. Similar names for stringed instruments are listed in Dena J. Epstein's article "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History." Epstein compares descriptions of necked chordophones with calabash bodies used in the Caribbean Islands and the United States. This data is taken from literature of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The calabashes used as resonators were covered with stretched skins or bladders. These instruments resemble the banyao described by Doña Fela Atilas and one banye described by Don Adolfo Pica Guadalupe. Both of these chordophones were seen by these informants in Patillas, Puerto Rico. However, among the stringed instruments listed in Epstein's article, none were mouth-bows as described by Don Víctor Rivera, Doña Olimpia de León and Don Adolfo Pica Guadalupe. The words banye and banyao are not on Epstein's list.²⁷

Doña Guadalupe Cepeda Ayala, a native of Las Carreras and resident in this sector of Medianía, gives important data on a musical bow of African origin. This informant states that her grandmother had described this instrument as being a bent rod with a cord tied to one end. The other end of the rod was stuck in the earth in an upright position. The cord went into the earth. This description is incomplete for no information on the resonator is revealed. The informant was not a witness to a performance with this instrument.²⁸

Doña Tiburcia Ortiz, an eighty-year-old native and resident of Las Carreras described the tumbandero as an instrument that consisted of a cord tied to a rod on one end and a hollowed calabash on the other. The calabash was placed in a hole in the earth. The performance of the tumbandero was accompanied with a dance and song.²⁹

Don Cecilio Manso Plaza, a native and resident of barrio Las Cuevas of Loíza offered information on this chordophone. At the time of the interview, this informant claimed to be eighty three years of age. Don Cecilio had heard from his elders of the tumbandero, but never saw or heard this musical instrument himself. Don Cecilio learned that song and dance went along with the tumbandero and could recall a fragment of the words of one of these songs. The melody was not remembered by this informant:

*El tumbandero
tenía hijos
chiquititos
y barrigones³⁰*

*The tumbandero
had small offspring
with large bellies.*

The different forms of musical bows remembered in Loíza and Guayama are contrasting manifestations of African influence in Puerto Rico. No evidence has been reported on the existence of the two banyao in Loíza. The overriding fact, though, is that more research is required in order to have a clearer idea of the construction of these chordophones.

NOTES

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²*El proceso abolicionista en Puerto Rico*. San Juan, Centro de Investigaciones Históricas, Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1974, pp. 132-135.

³Álvarez Nazario, Manuel, "Nuevos datos sobre las procedencias de los antiguos esclavos de Puerto Rico", *La Torre*, XXI/81-82 (julio-dic. 1973), p. 28.

⁴Abimbola, Wande, "Yoruba religion and culture," lecture delivered, Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, September 16, 1981, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

⁵Abimbola, Wande, *El Elemento Afronegroide en el Español de Puerto Rico*, San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1974, pp. 272-273.

⁶Ortiz, Fernando, "Los 'Diablitos' negros de Puerto Rico", Prologue: *La Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol en Loíza Aldea* by Ricardo E. Alegría, Colección de Estudios Puertorriqueños, 1954.

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⁸León, Argeliers, *Música Folklore/yoruba, bantú, abakuá*. Habana: Imprenta Revolucionaria, n.d.

⁹According to Don Julio Cepeda in an interview during July 1981. He is resident in Loíza and was 76 years of age at the time.

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¹¹Loza, Stephen Joseph, *Music and the Afro-Cuban Experience: A Survey of Yoruba Tradition in Cuba in Relation to the Origin, Form, and Development of Contemporary Afro-Cuban Rhythms*. Thesis: Latin American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1979, p. 16.

¹²Loza, *Music and the Afro-Cuban Experience*, p. 30.

¹³Campos Parsi, Héctor, "La Música en Puerto Rico" in *Gran Enciclopedia de Puerto Rico*, Madrid, Ediciones R, 1977, pp. 46-47.

¹⁴Dávila, Rafael (Chivirico), *Siete Potencias*, Cotique C-1061, side 1, band 5, c. 1972.

¹⁵Tracy, Hugh, *Handbook for Librarians*, Johannesburg: Gallo, n.d.

¹⁶Nketia, J.H. Kwabena, *The Music of Africa*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1974, pp. 98-99.

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¹⁸van Thiel, Paul, *Multitribal Music of Ankole*, Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale, 1977, pp. 97-99.

¹⁹Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, pp. 98-99.

²⁰Howard, Joseph, *Drums in the Americas*, New York: Oak Publications, 1967, p. 292.

²¹Vega Drouet, *Some Musical Forms*, p. 28.

²²van Thiel, *Multitribal Music of Ankole*, pp. 91-92.

²³Interview with Don Adolfo Pica Guadalupe on September 20, 1981.

²⁴Castellanos, Pablo, *Horizontes de la música precortesiana*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1970, p. 22.

²⁵Interview with Doña Olimpia de León vda. de Robles on August 1, 1980 in Arroyo, Puerto Rico.

²⁶Interview with Don Adolfo Pica Guadalupe on August 15, 1981 in his home at Hoyo Inglés, Guayama.

²⁷Interview with Don Víctor Rivera on January 2, 1982 in Puente de Jobos, Guayama, Puerto Rico.

²⁸Epstein, Dena J., "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History", *Ethnomusicology* XIX/3(Sept. 1975), pp. 347-371.

²⁹Interview on July 10, 1980.

³⁰Interview on July 10, 1980.