

Recorded by MORTON MARKS

Annotated by MORTON MARKS and ISIDRO BOBADILLA



ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4285

# **Afro-Dominican Music** **from San Cristobal, Dominican Republic**



COVER DESIGN BY RONALD GLYNE



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# **Afro- Dominican Music from San Cristobal, Dominican Republic**

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## **SIDE 1**

- |                   |       |
|-------------------|-------|
| 1. Palo de muerto | 10:15 |
| 2. Palo de muerto | 9:00  |

## **SIDE 2**

- |                      |      |
|----------------------|------|
| 3. Salve             | 4:00 |
| 4. Work song (Majao) | 2:10 |
| 5. Salve with palos  | 3:10 |
| 6. Congo rhythm      | 1:50 |
| 7. Salve with palos  | 4:10 |
| 8. Salve             | 3:25 |

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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# Afro-Dominican Music from San Cristobal, Dominican Republic

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The Dominican Republic is a culturally complex country, and is roughly divisible into several different culture zones. These include the more Hispanic or Iberian North (the Cibao), and a more African-influenced central-South region (including the province of San Cristobal and the area around the capital, Santo Domingo). The music on this record features examples of several different drumming styles from San Cristobal. The principal instruments are palo drums (see figure 1), of Congo-Angolan derivation. The music was recorded at the Festival de Atabales, or drum festival, held in Sainaguá in late August, 1981. The festival had been organized by local groups to show some of the stylistic variation in the drumming traditions of the province of San Cristobal, which may be considered an enclave of Congo-Angolan musical traditions.

Palo drumming is closely associated with the cofradías or religious brotherhoods of this region, which are usually devoted to the Espíritu Santo, or Holy Spirit. These Dominican cofradías parallel other institutional forms found among blacks in other parts of the New World colonized by the Spanish and Portuguese. Important examples include the irmandades of colonial Brazil (devoted to Our Lady of the Rosary and later, to St. Benedict), and the cabildos of 19th Century Cuba (see Carneiro, 1964, and Ortiz, 1952). Originating in the religious brotherhoods and trade guilds of medieval Spain and Portugal (Foster, 1953), these voluntary organizations became linked in the New World with the institution of slavery. They were originally organized along ethnic lines, and for this reason became important means for the preservation and transmission of cultural elements from West and Central Africa.

A detailed study of the Dominican cofradías, together with their attendant musical styles, has been made by Martha Ellen Davis in her thesis, "Afro-Dominican Religious Brotherhoods: Structure, Ritual and Music" (1976). She establishes the Congo-Angolan affiliation of palo drumming in the San Cristobal cofradías, and from this evidence draws an important conclusion about the slave trade in the Dominican Republic and its influence on the formation of Dominican culture. Davis writes, "...the rise and fall of cofradías dedicated to particular deities appear related to the history of the slave trade. The increasingly southern origin on the African coast of slaves co-occurs with, and seems related to, the extinction of cofradías associated with formerly-prominent 'nations' and the establishment of others associated with newly-prominent nations. Residual influence remains today from all areas which exported slaves to Santo Domingo. But the older the input, the more it has blended with other aspects of Dominican culture, so-called 'retentions' being less apparent. The obviousness of Congo-Angolan retentions in the central-South (including San Cristobal) may be attributable to the relatively recent importation of slaves from that area of Africa. Since the slave trade was cut off at the time slaves were being imported from the Congo-Angolan area, this was the African cultural input which remained least accommodated to new immigrations" (Davis, p.86-87).

Prior to Davis' thesis and the recent work of Dominican folklorists (notably Fradique Lizardo), little information on Afro-Dominican culture was available. In fact, black music and dance were often suppressed and prohibited within the Dominican Republic. Lizardo cites two relatively recent



examples of this suppression, one from 1931, when the Town Council of San Cristobal forbade the playing of drums in a religious festival in the town, and the other from 1956, when the Dominican Secretary of Education prohibited the performance of the carabiné for the delegates at a conference in Santo Domingo, because of the dance's "African origins" (Lizardo, 1978, pp. 73-74).

Rafael Trujillo was himself an exponent of the idea that the Dominican Republic is a "white" country, and it is really only since his death that extensive investigations of the African elements in Dominican culture have begun.

Looked at from outside the context of Dominican politics and ideology, the institutional structures and musical styles of the San Cristobal area show clear affinities to other New World traditions of Congo-Angolan origin. One example would be the musungu, the technique of rubbing the drum head with the fingers to produce a friction sound (see figure 2). This technique is often used to provide a bass line for the drumming, and may be heard on the third, seventh and eighth bands on this record. Parallel examples of friction tones used in drum ensembles are found in Brazil, in the Angolan-derived ongas and cuicas (from the mpuita or friction drum of Angola); the kinfũite or friction drum of Cuba was used in Congo drum ensembles (see Cabrera, p. 77), while Haitian drummers use friction techniques in Congo pieces. Other examples abound. The Dominican balsié, a drum placed in a horizontal position and on which the musician sits, playing it with his hands and damping the head with the heel of one foot, is parallel to the Juba drum of Haiti and to similar instruments with identical playing techniques of Bantu origin found throughout the Caribbean.

One important discontinuity between palo ensembles of the Dominican cofradías and ritual drum styles elsewhere in the Caribbean and Brazil is that this drumming is not specifically employed to induce trance. This is because the cofradías are not cults in the technical sense, since membership is voluntary and no deity is "seated" in a member during an initiation.

My thanks to the Club Sol Naciente of Sainaguá for permission to record, and to Braulio de los Santos for his assistance.



Figure 3: Playing the tambora.



Figure 1: Palo ensemble. Palo mayor is in the center.

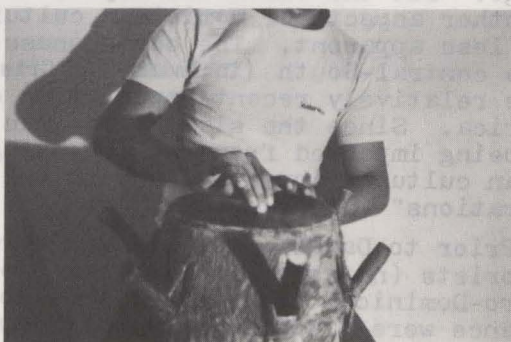


Figure 2: Musungu or Friction tone on palo mayor.



The Instruments:

Palos (bands 1,2,5,6).

A group of two or three long, single-headed drums, played with the hands. The largest and deepest-toned is the palo mayor or palo del medio, so-called because of its central placement in the drum ensemble. The higher-pitched support drums are known as alcahuetes; in some parts of the Dominican Republic one of the alcahuetes is known as the chivita; the second alcahuete may also be called the adulón. When palo drums are played in groups of two, the second drum is usually called the chivita, accompanying the palo mayor.

The set of three drums is usually associated in the San Cristobal area with funerary rites. They are heard here in the palo de muerto or palo de velación, accompanied by a single maraca, played by the vocalist.

Balsié (bands 3,7,8).

A single-headed drum, played in a horizontal position. The drummer sits on top of it, playing with his hands and damping the head with the heel of one foot. It can be heard playing the mu-sungu or friction tone on bands 3,7 and 8.

Tambora (bands 3, 8).

A double-headed drum that originates in the Cibao region. It is played horizontally, hung from the neck of the player by a cord; hand and stick are used (see figure 3).

Pandero (bands 3,7,8).

A tambourine-like frame drum, with a single goatskin head. These may appear in ensembles of several panderos, or singly, as on this recording.

Maraca (bands 1,2).

A seed-filled gourd with wooden handle. It appears here in the palo de muerto, played singly. They are sometimes played in pairs in other drum pieces.

Güiro (3,4,5,6,7,8).

Metal or gourd scraper, used to accompany drum ensembles.

The Music:

Bands 1,2. Palo de muerto or palo de velación. Played by ensemble of three drums, from Montañó, province of San Cristobal. This music is associated with funerary rites, which may be deathbed drumming (in this case, a dying member of the cofradía has requested the music), a wake, or to commemorate the anniversary of the death of the former organizer of the ceremony in which it appears. The apparent disorder of the drumming is organized around a fixed part played on one alcahuete.

Band 3. This piece is played by a group from Semana Santa. The ensemble consists of güiro, pandero, tambora and balsié. This is an example of a salve, "the most widespread musical form in Santo Domingo. It is used for saints' fiestas where it is played before the altar. It is so-named because it was originally a musical setting of the salve of the rosary. But in Santo Domingo it takes two extreme forms, and [a] spectrum of forms in between the two. One is non-metered and uses only the sacred salve text. It uses no instruments and is antiphonal in form. The other is very rhythmic and uses no sacred salve text. It is of call-and-response form. It incorporates membranophones-tamborines in the East



and various sorts in the South; it uses idiophones such as guiro and maracas" (Davis, p.114). It is the latter type salve heard here, and all the salves on this recording are of the rhythmic variety, tending toward semi-ritual or secular dance pieces. In this version, improvisation is in the higher-pitched pandero and tambora, whose stick technique is clearly audible. The balsié plays in a "3" pattern, sounding the friction tone. The vocal is in call-and-response form.

- Band 4. Work song (Majao), performed by a group from Sainaguá and Malpez. This piece accompanies the pounding of rice in large mortars, or pilones. A row of mortars is flanked by two rows of men on opposite sides, who pound the rice in turn. The sound of their pestles becomes the accompaniment to the song, along with a guiro. Majao is the name given to this collective activity using pilones.
- Band 5. Salve with palos. Instruments include the three drum palo ensemble and guiro. According to the notes prepared by the organizing committee of this festival, this is the only group heard here that plays the palos in the style of the eastern part of the Dominican Republic. Performed by group from Doña Ana.
- Band 6. Congo rhythm, performed by group from Semana Santa on three drum palo ensemble and guiro. This is a dance rhythm of a secular nature. There are many variants of the Congo dance in Dominican drumming traditions.
- Band 7. "Me voy pero vuelvo," salve with palos de Espiritu Santo. Performed by group from Semana Santa. Instruments include pandero, palo mayor, alcahuate, balsié and guiro. This is another secular dance piece from the cofradía for Espiritu Santo, with lyrics that seem to borrow from recreational dance music.
- Band 8. "Eres bonita," salve. Played by group from Semana Santa. Instruments are pandero, tambora, balsié and guiro. The friction tones of the balsié are especially prominent on this dance piece.

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