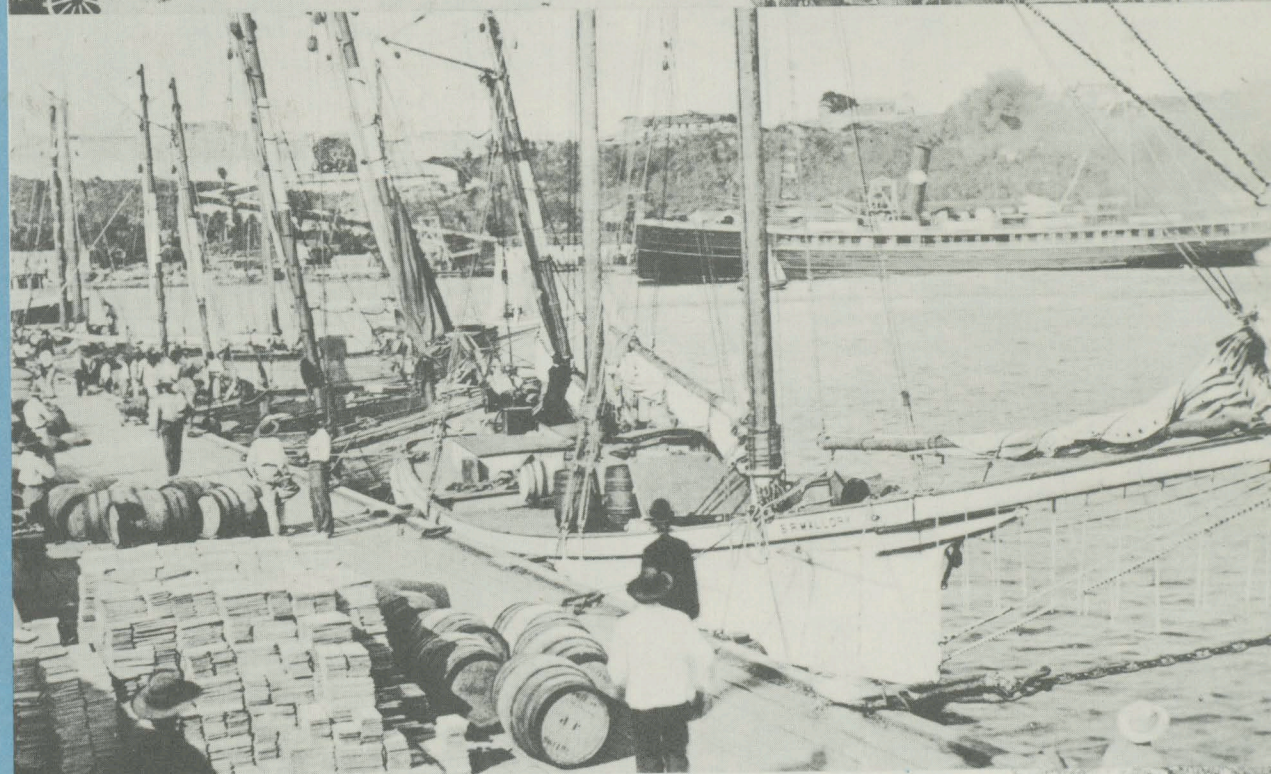


Cult Music of Cuba

Recorded in Cuba by Harold Courlander
Ethnic Folkways Library
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1951

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Three Views of Havana by S. A. Cohner, 1910

MUSIC LP

SIDE I
Band 1: SONG TO LEGBA AND YEMAYA
Band 2: LUCUMI SONG
Band 3: SONG TO ORISHA OKO
Band 4: ABAKWA SONG
Band 5: SONG TO ORISHA CHANGO

SIDE II
Band 1: ABAKWA SONG
Band 2: DJUKA DRUMS
Band 3: LUCUMI DRUMS
Band 4: DJUKA SONG
Band 5: SONG TO CHANGO
Band 6: SONG TO OBATALA

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CULT MUSIC OF CUBA

Introduction and Notes on the recordings
by Harold Courlander

The folk music of Cuba is generally unknown outside of that country. For most of us the term "Afro-Cuban" evokes thoughts of the Conga, the Rhumba, and the Son. Folk music they may be, but with a thick overlay of sophistication and invention; yet in the main they are not "Afro-Cuban", any more than boogie-woogie is "Afro-American". Such forms represent a considerable hybridization, and in particular instances it would be extremely difficult to find substantial African elements.

Among the Guahiros, or white peasant farmers, one could until fairly recently, at least, still hear fragments of very old Iberian music that has little in common with the popular city music. Likewise, among their Negro neighbors one could hear true Afro-Cuban, even pure African, music.

For years there has been a controversy in Cuban musical circles as to the origins of the national musical idiom. From a social point of view the final issue of that controversy is not important. But it is a matter of great interest that there really is such a thing as Afro-Cuban music, and this album presents some of its aspects.

These recordings were made in Havana, Guanabacoa, and Matanzas Province in 1940, during a field trip sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, in cooperation with Columbia University's Archive of Primitive Music.

The African slave trade continued in Cuba well into the 19th century. Until only a few decades ago there were some among the older generation whose parents actually were born in Africa, and a few aged people in the country who claimed to have been born in Africa. African traditions have survived strongly, in some respects, to this day. Music and dancing of the African variety have persisted in the cabildos, or societies, organized by the Afro-Cubans. A great many of these societies have a religious basis, while others are survivals of secret organizations which existed previously on the African continent.

Among the more important African cults existing in Cuba are the Lucumi, the Arara, the Abakwa and the Kimbisa.

In the Lucumi group survive religious beliefs of the Yoruba people who came from the region of West Africa that lies between the Niger River and the Nigeria-Togoland border. As with the African Yoruba, the Lucumi have a pantheon of spirit-gods or Orisha, most of whom are common to both areas. They include Legua (or Etcho), guardian of the crossroads; Ogun, god of the mountains; Otchosi, the hunter god; Obatala, god of iron and war; Chango, deity of storm and lightning; Orula, the curer; Otchun (or Panchagara), the river deity; Yemaya (or Yalode), god of the sea; and many others. Lucumi music is mainly devoted to supplication and praise of these supernatural beings. The musical instruments used by the Lucumi are drums, large calabash rattles with external bead strikers, and various kinds of bells.



Cumparsa scene showing double bell --
all photos by Harold Courlander

The Abakwa (or Carabali) group appears to be a secret society that cuts through other cults, permitting a member to belong to, say, the Lucumi society as well. The term Carabali may refer to the Calabar region of West Africa, and Abakwa seems to be derived from Abakpa, the name of a tribe from the Niger region. In Cuba members of the society are referred to by outsiders as Nañigos, a term that is not respectful and is much resented. The cult is composed entirely of men, its secrets are carefully guarded, and it retains some of the dramatic elements of African magico-religious life which are absent among the other Cuban cult groups. Spirit-dancers appear at cult functions to perform for the members. While Lucumi dancing stresses group participation and invocation, Carabali dancing is mainly pantomimic of animals, and performed by specialists. Probably one of the socially-significant facts in connection with the Abakwa cult is that while it is unquestionably an African cult its membership is partially composed of whites. At a meeting I witnessed in Guanabacoa, about one man out of every three participating in the ritual and singing was white, and of six new members initiated that night, only two were Negroes. Drums, bells, various African-style rattles, and friction drums are among the Abakwa musical instruments.

One of the main cults of Cuba is the Arara, which is known in Haiti as Arada. It is

strongest in Eastern Cuba, probably because of the presence of a large number of Haitian immigrants in that section. The Arara cult is a survival of the Dahomean religious practices and traditions. Like the Lucumi, the Arara cult has its pantheon of spirit-beings, including many that are familiar names in Dahomey and Haiti. Drums, African-style bells and small hand rattles are used in making Arara music, although sometimes a battery of large calabash or tin rattles with external strikers is employed.

The Kimbisa or Mayombe cult is only one of the many Congo groups known to have existed in Cuba. Numerous Congo "tribes" are spoken of by present-day Cubans, including the Palomonte, Biyumba, Mosundi Congo Real, Mundeli, Loango, Mondongo, and Bafiote. The Kimbisa deities are Ansasi, god of the storm; Saravanda, deity of the mountain; Pansua, the curer; Marelango, god of the ocean; Tchorla, a river deity; Tiemblaentoto, chief of the cemetery; Ensambia, crossroad guardian; and Kenge, god of war. Drums are the main instruments for Congo music, with hand rattles and wrist rattles sometimes supplementing.

Each of the cults retains, as part of its traditions, a ritual language, which is basically African. The Lucumi vocabulary is Yoruba, the Arara is Dahomean, and the Kimbisa is, seemingly, from one of the Congo dialects. Songs are sung either in the African languages, in Spanish, or in a hybrid linguistic combination.

For many years the Afro-Cuban cults have suffered at the hands of local officialdom. Cult activities have been outlawed by statute for many years, but usually they are not interfered with except at the whim and convenience of local officials. Cult members complain that local police have frequently raided the cult temples, confiscated drums and other paraphernalia, and imprisoned cult priests as a law and order demonstration following the report of a disturbance or crime in the region. In

addition to sometimes suffering as scapegoats for social ills arising out of acute poverty, the cults sometimes have been ridiculed by the "Castilian" whites, who both disapprove and fear cult activities.

I, 1: Song to Legba and Yemaya -- two male voices, with iya drum, atchere (calabash rattle with external strikers). Among the Orisha, or deities, invoked are Legba (or Etcho), guardian of the gateway, the crossroads, and of human fertility; Yemaya (or Yalode), the sea deity; and Oko, deity of agriculture.

I, 2: Lucumi Song -- two male voices, with iya drum, atchere (calabash rattle with external strikers). This song, which comes from the Lucumi repertoire, was recorded not far from Havana. The singers belonged both to the Lucumi cult and the Abakwa society.

I, 3: Song to Orisha Oko -- female voice. This song is an invocation to the Orisha, or spirit, Oko, patron of agriculture. The singer also calls upon other Orisha, such as Legba, Chango, and Yemaya.

I, 4: Abakwa Song -- male chorus, drums. Recorded at Guanabacoa.



Old Arara drums; some of these may have been carved by first-generation Africans in Cuba.



Guayo, a gourd scraper.

I, 5: Song to Orisha Chango -- male chorus, drums. This song, sung partly in Spanish, is to the Orisha Chango, deity of lightning and thunder. The choral part consists mainly of the words Buena Noche, Buena Noche.

II, 1: Abakwa song -- male chorus, drums. Recorded at Guanabacoa.

II, 2: Djuka drums -- three drums. This drumming was said by the performers to be a Djuka war dance.

II, 3: Lucumi drums -- played on the three Lucumi hour-glass shaped drums. This piece is a kind of salute to all the Orisha of the Lucumi cult, and is the first piece in a cycle of invocations to the various individual Orisha. The three Lucumi drums (called bata collectively) are the Iya (largest), Itotele (middle size), and the Ikonkolo or Amele (smallest). They are double-headed drums, with one large head and one small one. They are held in the laps of the drummers, who play the instruments at both ends. (See illustration.) Sometimes these sacred drums contain an African cocoa bean inside, which is believed to tie the rites to those in Africa. The Iya is decorated with a girdle of harness-type bells called Tchaworo, which can be heard tinkling faintly in the background.

II, 4: Djuka song -- drums and chorus.



Belt of bells, used by the Lucumi cult.



A calabash rattle of Cuba, inherited from Africa.

II, 5: Song to Chango -- chorus, drums. This piece belongs to the cycle of invocations which constitute a service, and appears to be sung to Chango, the Orisha of lightning and thunder.

II, 6: Song to Obatala -- chorus, drums. This is a Lucumi piece, a song to Obatala, deity of iron and war.

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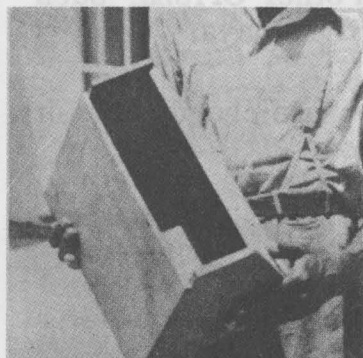
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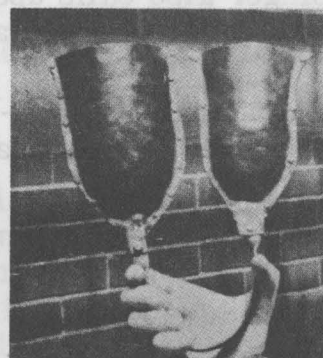
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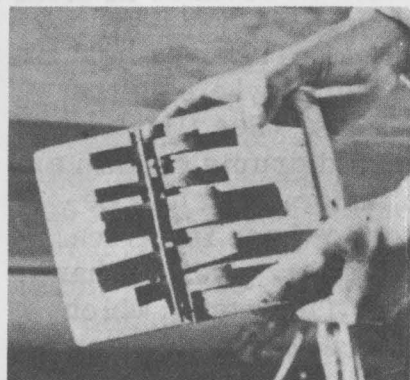
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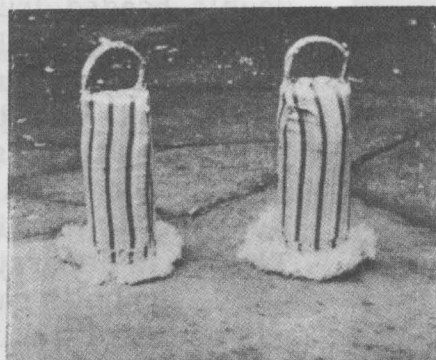
Quinto, a modern Cuban version of the African signal drum.



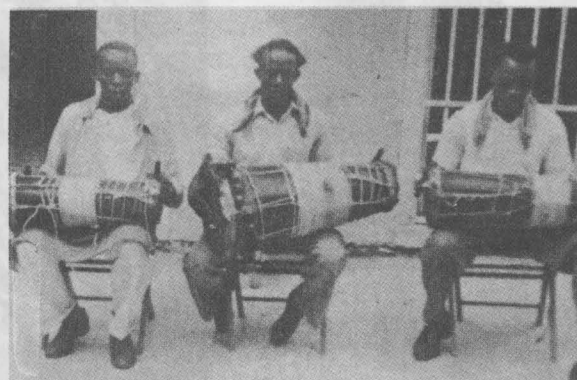
The double bell or organ, another African contribution to Cuban music.



The thumb piano, a musical instrument developed in Africa



Basket-type rattles used by the Carabali in Cuba; these are clearly African in origin.



A Lucumi orchestra, with typical drums; the larger drum has a belt of bells.