HAVANA & MATANZAS, CUBA ca.1957:
BATÁ, BEMBÉ, AND PALO SONGS

from the historic recordings of
LYDIA CABRERA and JOSEFINA TARAFÁ
HAVANA&MATANZAS, CUBA, ca.1957:
BATÁ, BEMBÉ, AND PALO SONGS

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INTRODUCTION

Lydia Cabrera once said that she had discovered Cuba on the banks of the Seine. She was born in 1900 into a prominent Havana family, her father a writer and publisher who had been active in the Cuban independence movement. She went to Paris in 1927 to study painting. Taking up residence in Montmartre, near the painter Utrillo’s studio, she enrolled at the École des Beaux Arts. Besides her painting, Cabrera began to study the art and religions of India and Japan, whose myths she later said reawakened her interest in Afro-Cuban studies. They reminded her of the stories she had heard from Black servants in her childhood. She lived in Europe until 1938, and during those eleven years she traveled extensively on the continent and made several trips back to Cuba. On a visit to Havana in 1928, Cabrera felt a strong need to establish contact with the Afro-Cuban community. It was during that visit that she befriended Omi-Tomi and other elders who would figure prominently in the pages of El monte (The Sacred Forest), her masterpiece of Afro-Cuban ethnography, first published in 1954 (Cabrera 1983).

Cabrera’s interest in Afro-Cuban studies was probably also stimulated by the cultural currents of Paris in the 1920s. Interest in négritude was very strong, and African art had been in vogue since the days of the Cubists, during the previous decade. In 1927, the year that Cabrera arrived in France, pioneering African-American dancer and actress Josephine Baker was at the height of her popularity in Europe. This period coincided with Cabrera’s first published work: Cuantos Negros de Cuba (Black Tales of Cuba). Cabrera had originally written these stories for Teresa de la Parra, a Venetian novelist, while de la Parra was convalescing in a Swiss sanitarium, where the two lived from 1932 to 1934 (shades of Thomas Mann and The Magic Mountain). The stories were first published in 1936 by Gallimard in a French translation.

In 1938, with warehouses gathering in Europe, Cabrera returned to Havana. In 1940, she and Maria Teresa de Rojas began to restore an abandoned 18th-century mansion, la Quinta San José, owned by Rojas. They hoped to turn it into a museum that would document the evolution of the Cuban colonial house, and they filled it with antique furniture and art. It was in Marianao, on the edge of the mostly Black Pogolotti district, which Cabrera had often visited on previous trips to Havana, and which she continued to frequent.

In 1942, she traveled to other parts of Cuba, continuing her studies of Afro-Cuban religions and folklore, which ultimately focused on the Havana area and Matanzas. This was the beginning of the years of research that culminated in her masterpiece, El monte.

Cabrera and Rojas were still living at the Quinta San José when these recordings were made in the late 1950s. With Josefa Tarafa, a photographer who often accompanied Cabrera in her research and who took many of the photographs that appear in El monte, Cabrera set out to record Afro-Cuban ritual music. In her prolific investigations of Afro-Cuban traditions, Cabrera never used a tape recorder. She relied instead on her phenomenal memory and on index cards. Her contributions as a musicologist are perhaps the least-known part of her output, and the recordings she and Tarafa made are often not cited in her bibliographies. It may have been her friend’s fascination with technology that persuaded Cabrera to venture into this kind of research. With Tarafa’s portable Ampex tape recorder and the help of two sound engineers who later transferred the tapes to discs, the team managed to record a set of fourteen LPs, Música de los cultos africanos en Cuba (Music of the African Cults in Cuba). Some of the music was recorded in Havana, but most of it was collected in rural and semi-rural areas of Matanzas, where Tarafa’s family owned a sugar mill (central) that became the base of operations for the team’s research.

In 1954, Tarafa, like her father before her, published a rendition of a classic work about the Cuban sugar industry, Ensayo sobre el cultivo de la caña de azúcar (Essay Concerning the Cultivation of Sugarcane), by Alvaro Reynoso. Born in the province of Havana, Reynoso was educated at the Royal University of Havana and the University of Paris. His book, first published in 1862, revolutionized the sugar industry by introducing scientific yield-management methods, which greatly increased sugar yield per acre. It was translated into French, Dutch, English, and Portuguese, and quickly spread throughout the world, helping transform Cuba
into a center of scientific astronomy. The book immortalized the native-born Reynold, and today Cuba still celebrates "Sugar cane Day" on his birthday. It is ironic that soon after publishing a book that had led to the intensification of the sugar industry and of slavery, Tarafa would be involved in the documentation of the religion and music of the descendents of the sugar mill slaves in the area surrounding her family's central (Cabrera 1973).

In Matanzas, Cabrera and Tarafa focused on Lukumi music as performed in rural areas (ori oyo) by priests (olorishas), many of whom were descendents of the Yoruba slaves who had worked at the local sugar mills. They also collected Ararú (Dahomean) and Kongo material, some of which is heard in this collection (tracks 21–22). Their recordings open new horizons in the study of the rural Afro-Cuban culture, and give glimpses of late 19th-century life in the slave quarters (Barcones). Much of this music is in an old bembé lukumi style, unfamiliar even to those well versed in Afro-Cuban drumming, but powerfully illustrated by the master drummer in the song accompanying an offering for Oshun at the irongo tree (Matanzas, Cuba ca. 1957; Afro-Cuban Sacred Music from the Countryside (SFW CD 40490), "Yeye." track 21). If the music on Havana, Cuba ca. 1957: Rhythms and Songs for the Orishas (SFW CD 40489) sounds more familiar, it may be because it is the parent style of what is now heard outside of Cuba in the orisha worship of San Juan, Miami, and New York, and on the U.S. west coast. Havana batá drumming has been analyzed in The Music of Santería (Amira and Cornelius 1999). It is the song and drum style analyzed in detail decades ago by Fernando Ortiz, Cabrera's contemporary and her brother-in-law. Many of the rhythms in the ori de ighodá cycle recorded by Cabrera and heard in its entirety on the Havana volume of these recordings (SFW CD 40489) can be found transcribed in several of Ortiz's works, including La africana de la música folklórica de Cuba and Los bailes y el teatro de los negros en el folclor de Cuba (Ortiz 1981, Ortiz 1998).

This music can serve as a soundtrack to portions of Cabrera's own writings. Cases in point are the songs to Osain, orisha of medicinal and liturgical plants, heard in the Havana CD (SFW CD 40489, track 32). A passage in El monte details the setting for these songs, which accompany the preparation of the oríncio, the sacred water that is used "to wash and to make Santo," to purify the neophyte (iyowo) during the first days of their ordination into Santería. Sometimes the iyari (principal godmother) or iyigbona (second godmother or godfather) leave the room as the santeras begin simultaneously to tear up the plants and squeeze the juice from their leaves. As they proceed, a person called the oriire begins the songs that accompany this rite, and the santeras answer in chorus. There are sixteen, seventeen, or twenty-one prayers for Osain. That is, with these songs and prayers the santeras make ori or summon the orishas" (Cabrera 1983).

The fourth song in the Osain series ("Osin giber giber to bísos"), heard in this collection accompanied by batá drums (track 5), also connects Cabrera to the work of two important researchers in her generation: Harold Courlander and Melville Herskovits. Calling it a "Lukumi song," Courlander had collected the same melody near Havana in 1940, and it appears on his 1951 Folkways record, Cult Music of Cuba (F-4410, track 2). In Courlander's notes to his recordings (1950), he in turn recognized its similarity to a Brazilian song. One can sense his excitement here, as field recordings began to reveal the outlines of the interconnected and transnational nature of the music of the Yoruba diaspora in the Americas. "Probably one of the most interesting points in connection with this ["Lukumi song"] is that almost the identical melody was recorded by Dr. Melville J. and Frances Herskovits in [Bahia,] Brazil in the early 1940s." The Brazilian variant, from the repertoire of one of the Yoruba cults, is somewhat richer in its form and presentation, but the identity of the two songs is immediately apparent" (Courlander 1951).

Besides echoing Courlander's research in Havana and Herskovits's in Brazil, a song recorded by Cabrera and Tarafa in Matanzas suggests another link in the Yoruba diaspora, this time between Cuba and Trinidad. In the late 1930s and at the opposite end of the Caribbean, Melville Herskovits had found in the Trinidadian village of Toco a "Yariba" song, "Oshun Talade" ("Oshun is worthy of queenship"), that was being sung simultaneously in Matanzas, Cuba. The song may have come with the Yoruba who were arriving on both islands at around the same time, in the mid 1800s. They had come while slavery was still in force, but in Trinidad they kept arriving as indentured workers after slavery had ended there in 1838. The formats of the songs differ, but the melodies are
identical. Both versions may be found on the CD The Yoruba / Dakomen Collection. Orisha across the Ocean (Rykodisc RCD 10452), as "Ochun Talade" (track 13), and "Yariba-Oshun," (track 21).

The Cabrera-Tarafa recordings can thus serve as a hub of Afro-Atlantic music, connecting Cuba not only to New York and Trinidad, but to Bahia, Brazil. Awareness that branches of the Yoruba diaspora have musical links goes back to the early 1940s or before. Recent musical experiments have made the Cuba-Bahia connection even more explicit. A recent CD, Bata Keta: A Musical Interplay of Cuba and Brazil (Bembé CD 20102), brings together the music of Havana-style orisha worship and Brazilian Candomblé, even within the same song. Using the same melody and text, singers and percussionists shift seamlessly between Cuban and Brazilian performance styles, as in the song for Eleguá / Oxó (track 2.1–2.3).

The Osain song collected by Cabrera and Courtlander in 1970, Cabrera started a new writing career and published extensively well into her 80s. Lydia Cabrera died in Miami in 1991.

Cuba and by Herskovits in Brazil is also performed by Bata Keta, who place the melody and Cuban and Brazilian singers over a contemporary samba-reggae rhythm ("Kura Kuru Reggae" tracks 3.2, 3.3). The intuition Courtlander had in 1951 thus comes to life for contemporary audiences through a musical experiment, largely made possible by advances in recording technology—the same technology that has given new life to, and restored the sound of, recordings collected almost fifty years ago by Lydia Cabrera and Josefa Tarafa, recordings that give a glimpse of Afro-Cuban culture in Havana and the Matanzas countryside just a few years before Fidel Castro came to power. In 1960, Lydia Cabrera and Marta Teresa de Rojas settled in Miami. The same year, the Quinta San José was destroyed by fire. In 1970, Cabrera started a new writing career and published extensively well into her 80s. Lydia Cabrera died in Miami in 1991.

HAVANA

Cabrera and Tarafa made most of their recordings in Matanzas, but they recorded several song cycles and a sequence of bata rhythms called the orishas, heard in its entirety on Havana, Cuba ca. 1957: Rhythms and Songs for the Orishas (SFW CD 404-94), in Havana. The bata orchestra consists of a master drum (oyá, "mother"), a middle support drum (óxóchelé), and a small support drum (óxócholó). Strands of brass bells (chavuero) are strung around the heads of the master drum. The predominance of bata drums in Havana and the preeminence of their owner, Shango, are indicative of the predominance of Yoruba culture in the capital (Ramos 2000).

OBÚ CANTADO WITH BATA DRUMS

Tracks 2–3 performed by Cándido Martinez or Antonio Allerich, song leaders (akwaín), chorus (ankañí), and bata trio led by Miguel Santa Cruz and Juan González

1. Íde werewere n'íta Oshún íde werewere
(Song for Oshún)

"Brass, Oshún's small child, is out in the open."

In Nigeria, Oshún is orisha of the river that bears her name and flows past her principal shrine, in Osogbo. Her major symbols are river-worn stones and small brass rods, which distinguish her from other river deities (Bascou 1990-92). She is the owner of brass, and her worshipers wear bracelets of this metal as her insignia. In Cuba, Oshún is also associated with copper and brass, which, as in Nigeria, are important attributes of this orisha. The title of this song alludes to Oshún's "small child," brass (obú), which she never leaves "out in the open," or abandoned. Werewere also means "small children." The song is based on a cowry divination (Céfalous) verse, called Osa in Cuba (Bascou, 1952), in which Oshún buried her first child, brass, in order to protect it from an imminent windstorm. Obatalá buried his lead, and Ogün buried his

"talking" of the bata drums, which have preserved the outlines of the speech melody of Nigerian Yoruba (Ortiz 1990:59 and note to track 6).

BATA SALUTE (GUARACHITA)

Performed by Miguel Santa Cruz, Gustavo Diaz, and Juan González

1. Tu-tui for Shango

During a ceremony, bata drummers may play certain rhythms, which Cabrera calls guarachitas, to mark the presence of an orisha and to enliven the ceremony. This one, tu-tui, is for Shango, owner of the bata drums. Cabrera calls it "a toque [drum salute] characterized by its accelerated rhythm, like the aluyí (another of Shango's toques), intended to 'call' or bring on trance among the children of Shango" (Cabrera 1970:312). Ortiz says the name tu-tui in Yoruba refers to the
iron. When the windstorm abated and they dug up the metals, only Oshún’s “child” and the lead had survived the ordeal, while iron had rusted or wasted away. This divination verse explains why iron rusts, and also tells us that we should take care of our firstborn (Rascom 1953; Willie Ramos, personal communication).

In Cuba, Oshún was syncretized with La Caridad del Cobre, an image of the Virgin Mary that was found in the sea in the early 17th century. Her shrine is located in the town of Cobre (Copper), in the Sierra Maestra Mountains, near the city of Santiago in eastern Cuba. La Caridad del Cobre is the patron of Cuba.

3. **Okú ó Sholá Kiniňá ó**
(Praise Song [oríṣá] for Aganjú)

A possible translation of the opening lines might be:

Okú ó (honorable salutation). / Owner of great honor. / may nothing affect you, our great king.

Praise songs, *ncest* in Spanish and *oríṣá* in Lukumi, are different from chants (*áyére*). They are used to call an oríṣá to “mount” an initiate (*omó*), especially when the possession is taking a long time to happen.

Agnajú is the oríṣá of volcanoes and the wilderness and in Cuba is considered to be the father of Shangó. He is syncretized with Saint Christopher, patron of Havana, whose colonial cathedral bears his name. It is probably because of this association with the saint, whose chromolithograph shows him bearing the infant Jesus on his shoulders, that Aganjú is also the oríṣá of porters, stevedores, and boatmen.

4. **Bábabá Furú ò olóré ré ó** (Song for Obatalá)
The oldest and most important oríṣá, Obatalá was the first to be created by Oloodumare, the Yoruba Supreme Being, and he represents him on earth. Obatalá shaped the human body, and Babá Furú is a road of Obatalá credited with the creation of humankind, the same as Alamoré, the sculptor. He is sometimes syncretized with Jesus the Nazarene, and Cabrera says that according to Lukumi elders, Bábá Furú is a name for the Obatalá identified with the Christ of Calvary (Cabrera 1970-71). The interplay among the three drums, or the *báta* “conversation,” is particularly well executed here.

5. **Kurukuru bede / Osain ańádárá máádó ó**
(Song for Osain)

*Kurukuru bede / arisó Osáyín / mááwá rírè*

“The small one arrives: / hear the sound of Osayín: / [the sound of his] palm fronds is good.”

Osain is the owner of eje, the liturgical and medicinal plants that are fundamental for oríṣá worship. His báti rhythm, called kurukuru bede, is heard accompanying this song, which was collected in several versions by Cabrera, and is cited in the introduction to this collection.
MATANZAS

LUKUMÍ PRAYERS

Performed by Domingo Hernández and unknown companion

6. Mojuba Olodumare

To Olodumare, the oríshas and the ancestors

Yoruba religion on both sides of the Atlantic has been described as a mixture of monothelism and polytheism. Besides its multiplicity of oríshas, it also stresses a belief in a Supreme Being who is transcendent and personal at the same time, and is known variously as Olodumare, Olorun, and Olofi. Unlike the oríshas, he has no special worshipers or cult; prayers are addressed to him, but no sacrifices are offered directly to him, and he has no shrines (Bascom 1969:79). Olodumare/Olorun/Olofi created the oríshas, and then gave them practical control over the forces that govern worldly reality. Despite being distant and hidden (jubilado or "retired," in the words of an elderly Lukumí), Olodumare is invoked in rites, and the faithful seek his protection every day (Castellanos and Castellanos 1992:20).

These prayers are in Lukumí, the Yoruba language of Cuba. Today, Lukumí is mostly a liturgical language, and is studied as part of the initiation process into Regla de Ocha, or Santería as it is popularly known. But as recently as 1951, William Bascom was able to converse in Yoruba in certain parts of Cuba (Bascom 1951), and Alfred Metraux was amazed when he visited the town of El Perico in Matanzas with Lydia Cabrera in the 1950s and heard elders conversing fluently in Lukumi (Castellanos and Castellanos 1992).

Lydia Cabrera had commented that going from Havana to Matanzas was like passing back to the 19th century, so it is not surprising that the area would be linguistically conservative as well. These prayers may be another example of that conservatism. Unlike Cuban Lukumí, Nigerian Yoruba is a tone language, which means that changes in pitch are used to distinguish meaning between otherwise identical combinations of vowels and consonants: aro (cymbal), aro (indigo dye), aro (lamentation), and aro (granary) (where 'is high tone, unmarked is mid tone, and ' is low tone) (Bascom 1969:99). Under the influence of Cuban Spanish, the sound system of Nigerian Yoruba changed somewhat in its transition to Cuban Lukumí, and the tonal features were lost. But here, in what may be a more archaic variety of Lukumí and hence closer to its Nigerice sources, the intonation pattern of the prayers suggests the rise and fall of a tone language. It would be interesting to compare this passage to Nigerian Yoruba; perhaps prayers, like songs and batá-drumming patterns (see note to track 1), have preserved the speech melody or tone patterns of Nigerian Yoruba.

BEMBÉ LUKUMÍ

Tracks 7–10 performed by Alberto Yenkines and group.

7. Agó agó '沣a mojuba / Ibarabo agó mojuba (Songs for Esuñ)

Alberto Yenkines, known as Yin, was one of the most traditional singers (oloríta) in Matanzas. Elderly Lukumí worshippers (aborísa) from Jovellanos and other
8. **Oyá o owló kòdè Oyá bẹ̀ wá lò**  
*(Song for Oyá)*

Possible translation: Oyá who brings money and other benefits from abroad / Oyá go and bring us more.

In Nigeria, Oyá is the orisha of the Niger River. In Cuba, she is considered the second wife of Shango. Oba being his first and principal wife (see note to track 15 below). Closely allied to Shango, she manifests as the strong wind that precedes a thunderstorm, and is associated with whirlwinds (her name means “she tore” in Yoruba). She also has a fiery aspect, celebrated in another song from Matanzas (SFW CD 40489, track 12). In the version heard here, Yin sings the same middle section of that song. His spoken Lukumi includes Oya’s other Cuban name, Yansá, which means mother of nine and is the name by which she is commonly known in Brazil (but spelled Iansá). The salute that Yin shouts, “*Jekú Héri Òyá!*” resembles Oya’s salute in Brazilian Yoruba religion: “*Ipeh Héri Òli!*” (What a goddess!) (Gleason 1992 and Verger 1981).

9. **Obé ré obé Ayánúka Naná lewá**  
*(Ararú song for Naná Burúkú)*

Yin shouts “*Ararú!*” near the beginning of this song, and although most of his repertoire was Lukumi (Cuban Yoruba), he probably also knew many other Dahomean songs. In Cuba, *Ararú* is the name applied to the peoples who came from Dahomey (today called Benin), including the Fon, the Mahi, and others. The Mahi people were from northern Dahomey and their capital was Savalu, which was conquered by the Fon. Although overshadowed by the Yoruba, the Arará had a considerable presence in the part of Matanzas where these recordings were made, and the Lukumi and Arará religions practiced there shared some common elements.

When Yin shouts “*Ókiti káta!*” he is saluting Naná Burúkú, whose cult is widely diffused across West Africa. In the Americas, she is considered the mother of Babalúayé. Naná Burúkú is the oldest of the water orishas, and is associated with the still water of lakes and swamps. In Cuba, she is believed to take the form of a maják snake and to live in stands of bamboo, sacred to Naná Burúkú. Her salute, “*Ókiti káta!*” is said while touching the ground with one’s left hand and then bringing it up quickly to touch the right shoulder (Cabrera 1973:59). In Matanzas, initiates into both Regla Lukumi and Regla Arará (Cuban Yoruba and Dahomean religions) receive Naná Burúkú together with Babalúayé (Cabrera 1973).

10. **Ibejí otá esé aremú ‘Ibejí otá esé**  
*(Song for the divine twins)*

This song is for the Ibejí, the divine twins, who are given special honor in Cuba as they are among the Nigerian Yoruba, who have one of the highest rates of twin births in the world. When a twin died, the Yoruba in Cuba continued the West African practice of making a memorial figure that represented the deceased. In Cuba, the statuette is called *esi ibejí*, and “it is baptized, washed with herbs, and fed” (Cabrera 1972:157). The Cuban Ibejí receive the same names as in Nigeria: Taiso (from Taiso) for the first-born twin and Kainde (from Kehinde) for the second, who is considered the senior of the pair, since he sent the firstborn to inspect the world for him (Bascom 1969:95). The word *aremú* in this song title refers to the senior twin.
to tell from these recordings if one or two support drums are present. The function of the master drum (iyá) is similar to that of the master drum in Brazilian Candomblé or Haitian Vodou: its patterns are closely related to the dancing, and the intention of the drummer’s variations is to bring on possession. As can be heard in the following tracks, the master drummer plays off-accents under the singing, in much the same way as in Candomblé. He also plays against the hoe blade (patoaca), which another musician strikes to keep the basic timeline. The bembé drums are also accompanied by a single-headed gourd rattle (ábe chekre). The result is a highly structured and intricate set of cross-rhythms, which in some cases, as in tracks 14–16 below, can achieve an almost architectural majesty. Whoever thinks that bembé is a minor style should listen to this orí konto, and we should be thankful to Cabrera and Tarafa for preserving it.

11. Kiri nya kiri nya agó / Eshu o Elegbare a
(Song for Elegba)
"He wanders about separating, make way / Elegba I pay homage, Elegba make way."
As the threshold and crossroads orísha, Eshu/Elegba/Elegbare is always honored first in the Yoruba and Dahomean-influenced areas of the Americas, and every orí and ńjú (drum or song cycle) will open with a rhythm or song to him. In the complete Matanzas orí konto as originally recorded by Cabrera and Tarafa, this song is used to close the song cycle.

12. Koléle kólé ó iyá ó wó miyá kóléle
(Song for Ogún)
This song alludes to the lack of a home: it means my mother has no home or the householder’s mother has no home. It puns on kóléle ("I have no home") and iko ("householder"), a function of Ogún.
If Shango is king (alojín) in Havana, then Ogún rules in Matanzas, where he was the major orísha of the countryside (Montejo 1960). Warrior and blacksmith, Ogún, always toiling at his anvil and forge, represents slavery in el campo, the rural areas. Other symbols of Ogún, including the machete and the mayordome’s whip, reinforced the connection between this orísha and rural slavery (Ramón 2000:106-107).

13. Babá Furúrú oríló ré ó
(Song for Obatalá)
This is a rural version of the Havana song heard with a batá conversation on track 4 in this collection. It is in an additive 3+3+2 rhythm, in contrast with the usual 6/8 time signature, heard on the other tracks.

14. Motoribale oba [k]oso / Motoribale fu'[n] Shango
(Song for Shango)
"I salute you, king of Koso [the king did not hang] / My salutations I offer you."
"According to a [Nigerian] myth, it was a defeat in a magical contest that led Shango to leave Oyo and hang himself, although when lightning flashes, his worshipers shout ‘The king did not hang himself’ (‘Oba ko so’)" (Bascom 1969). Shango was a king of the Oyo Yoruba, and his cult was an institutionalized state religion throughout the Oyo Empire (Warner-Lewis 1991). His people, many of whom became captives in wars with the Fulani, were prominently represented in the Yoruba diaspora, and in some parts of the Americas his name has come to epitomize orísha worship, whether as Shango in Trinidad and Grenada, or as Xangó in Recife, Brazil.

15. Kayóbá Obá ó omó lowó Obá lére mi / Oba eleko ayà osì
(Song for Obá)
Obá is the orísha of the Nigerian river that bears her name. The legitimate wife of Shango, she was anxious to keep her husband by her side, and was tricked into cutting off one of her ears to serve to her husband in one of his favorite dishes. Obá does not come down in Cuba, but she does so in Brazilian Candomblé, and when she possesses a worshipper, a turban is tied around her head to cover her mutilated ear. Obá has warrior aspects, and one of her symbols is a sword, which identifies her with Shango. Like Ogún, she is said to work at a forge, and this aspect is symbolized by an anvil.

The second song here is the better-known one, although sung in a somewhat different style than in Havana.

16. Awayó, Yemayá ó omo du kwe [modupú]lé ó lowó mi
(Song for Yemayá)
"Awayó (a title of Yemayá), / I thank you for my money [I thank you for what you have provided me]."
According to Cabrera, Awayó is the name of the oldest Yemayá, who in Cuba has seven roads or avatars (Cabrera 1970:67). In the words of one elder, Yemayá Awayó is the road "born of Olokun, the eldest and richest and most elaborately dressed. When she wages war and defends her children, she girds herself with seven skirts. When she goes out walking, she adorns herself with Olokun’s ornaments and crowns herself with the rainbow. Oshumará" (Cabrera 1974:28)."
GUIRO SONG

17. iyámi ile oro [odo]
(Praise song or oríí for Oshun)
Performed by Marcos Portillo Domínguez, with ághé trio, 
hoe blade, and bembé drum.

"My mother's house is in the river." In Havana and 
Matanzas, odo, the Lukumi word for river, is frequently 
pronounced oro. The ághé, also called chékeré and guiro, is a large, hollow, 
dried gourd, covered with a network of beads, seeds, or 
cowries. The gourds can be shaken or struck to produce 
effects, and this song emphasizes the tremolo, instead 
of the percussive, side of the guiro orchestra. An ensemble of three such rackets, a hoe blade, and a 
single drum play a Lukumi sub-style called guiro. Ortiz has 
observed that guiro trios are found more in the 
country-side, where they substituted for drums, than in Havana.

For Matanzas, Cabrera gives the names for the trio as 
follows: cajas or mayor (largest), segundo (second) or 
galpeador (beater), and salidor ("one who goes out").
The smallest gourd is perhaps so named because it is 
shaken outside the main rhythm to produce a tremolo 
effect, said to attract the saints.

Marcos Portillo Domínguez, the song leader, was a member of the work gang at the Maratiegu sugar mill 
in Corral Falso (Pedro Betancourt), not far from the 
Central Cuba, the mill owned by Tarafa's family. His 
African name was Asébó, given to Shango initiates, 
and he learned this and other guro songs from the old 
Oyo Yoruba at the Maratiegu central.

ITUTU SONGS
Tracks 18–20 performed by Fernando Hernández and group.

18. Okonitel ré tó é okò mi lo é milé bewá é
19. Omodé t'órisa de ké awáo omodé funmi rawáo

20. É bò oró, be mode lóró

Some of the most remarkable recordings made by 
Cabrera and Tarafa in Matanzas are of funerary rites, 
known as ituts (coolness), which are performed to 
fulfill the wishes of the deceased Lukumi priest, priestess, 
or diviner and of their oríísàs prior to burial. These 
rites are performed so that their spirits can enter the 
next world tutu, "cool," or at peace. These three songs 
are from an oríí or song cycle to the egún (spirits of the 
dead), and are part of a ceremony known as levantamiento del Plato (raising of the plate). In this rite, a 
dinner plate belonging to the deceased is broken on a 
street corner, which is meant to free the egún of earthly 
needs (Cabrera and Tarafa 1958)

Fernando Hernández, the song leader, was a member of the 
group led by Inés Sotomayor, heard on the 
Matanzas companion volume to this collection (SFW 
CD 40490). Sotomayor was an elderly and respected 
leader (akpóon) from the town of Jovellanos, and was 
descendant of Yorubas who had been slaves at the 
Arrati sugar mill. She organized and led the well-
attended annual festival that honored their ancestors 
and the "saints of the barraconos" (Marks 2001).

Hernández was also a descendant of Yorubas who 
worked the same sugar mill, and he shared spiritual ties 
with Inés Sotomayor.

The first song in this series, Okoníl ré tó é okò mi lo é 
milé bewá é (track 18), is still in use as the opening song 
in the honor ritual of the Yekuwa society of Jovellanos.

Honras is a ceremony for an 
initiate (olorisha) after 
the third month of the person's 
death. Honras is celebrated 
differently throughout Caba, 
and in the Yekuwa ceremony, an 
elaborate table is set up with 

a number of food offerings 
(aduná) for the deceased. 
The ritual begins at midnight 
and lasts until sunrise (Willie 
Ramos, personal communica-

Palo Songs - Mayimbe
(Turkey vulture or turkey buzzard)

Just as some sugar mills in 
Matanzas were known as cen-
ters of Lukumi or Arará culture, others were hubs of 
Kongo religion. Kongo-Angolan peoples were among 
the largest Afro-Cuban groups in rural Matanzas, after 
the Lukumi and the Carabalí. Of all the collective terms 
used to specify African origins, Kongo encompasses the 
greatest diversity of peoples brought to Cuba during 
the years of the slave trade. In her Spanish-Congo vocabu-
lar, Cabrera lists over seventy different Afro-Cuban 
expressions designating the name Congo (Cabrera 
1984:52–54). As was the case for the Lukumi and the 
Arará, Kongo cultures were 
preserved in urban settings in 
cabildos, societies of free and 
enslaved Blacks from the same 
African nation, which later 
included their Cuban descend-

tants. The names of the myriad 
Cuban Kongo cabildos reflect the geography of the slave trade 
or else include African ethnic 

designations. Sometimes they 
boasted common features 
(Loango, Benguela, and Cabi-
da, the last also very important 
for Brazil), and sometimes they 
spelled clan origins, such as 
the Nsolo (Baambo) and 
Mayombe (Yombe), who also 
gave their name to a Cuban- 
Kongo religion (Thompson and 
Cire 1981:149).

At the sugar mills of rural Matanzas, Cabrera mentions 
the presence of many Kongo peoples, including 
Musundes, Mubaks, Benguecas, and Ngolas (Cabrera 
1983:63). Among the sugar mills known for their 
Kongo religion, Cabrera mentions in particular one
called Asturias, near the town of Agramonte, which was home to a ritual specialist (palero o mayombero) named Pio Congo. Agramonte is in exactly the area where she and Tarafa recorded (Cabrera 1979:137). Cabrera notes the secretive nature of Kongo rites in Matanzas, as opposed to Lukumi ceremonies, which were often held out in the open (Cabrera 1983).

Cabrera investigated rural and urban Kongo religions extensively, and her findings can be found in both El monte and in her Reglas de Congo. Palo Monte-Mayombe. A central feature of all Cuban Kongo ritual, whose variants also include Briyumba and Kumbusa, is the niazi or prendo, a three-legged iron kettle or cooking pot in which are concentrated various ingredients that embody natural forces, and the spirit of a dead person. Some palo songs are directed at the niazi, stimulating the forces within, or else are meant to accelerate spirit possession among participants. Palo rhythms are not as differentiated as the Lukumi and Arará toques for the orishas. They are usually played on three ngoma drums, accompanied by a hoe blade called an ngongsi, and sometimes by metal or gourd rattles called nkembi. The song leader is called a gallo in Spanish and insensu in Kongo, and the chorus is called usuallo or muana. Song texts are in a mixture of负荷, a creolized Spanish, and Cuban Kongo, which is largely derived from the Kongo language, spoken in what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) and northern Angola.

The following two songs might be unique in that they place an important Kongo ritual element in a rural sugar-mill context.

Tracks 21 and 22 performed by Sikir?! Bar??. Martín Catalán, Sergio Rodríguez, and Rodolfo Viart.

21. Ndudu da veulta al ingenio (The spirit is circling the sugar mill)

The vulture is a religious symbol in a number of different traditions, both Old World and New. The turkey vulture (Cathartes aura) is the variety found in the Americas, and is a common sight in rural Cuba. The bird’s Afro-Cuban name, mayimbe, comes from the Ki-kongo word ma-ymbi (Castellanos 1988), and the bird is called aura tativo in Spanish. In Cuba, it has been prized by paleros for its “knowledge of the unknown, keen vision, and mighty wings” (Cabrera 1983:153), which can attain a span of up to 6 feet. Its head or dried body is often an ingredient in the palero’s iron kettle (niazi).

It has been described as the most graceful soaring bird in the world, and is an expert at following thermals and updrafts. When soaring, it holds its wings in a dihedral or “V” shape and rocks from side to side, instead of holding them straight out and flapping. In Caribbean Spanish, the word mayimbe has come to mean one who flies the highest, or is the best at anything. It is a term known to any Dominican, since El Mayimbe is the nickname of Fernando Villalona, a popular merengue singer.

22. Vola volando nsaura (The turkey vulture is flying around)

The turkey vulture, whose scientific name Cathartes aura means pacifier or cleanser, occupies a significant place in the belief systems of Cuban Kongo religions.

Because it feeds on carrion, Cuban Kongo identified the bird with the dead and as a messenger of death, and they invoked it in songs that accompanied meals offered to a deceased palero.

Vamos lo convite Sauero
Vamo a lo convite Sauero
Niazo lo convite Sauero

(Let’s share this meal with the departed, let’s share it with the turkey vulture) (Cabrera 1979:177).

In the American South, as in other parts of the country, Cathartes aura is also called a buzzard, technically a distinct species. In the Kongo-influenced area of coastal Georgia and the Carolinas, the bird’s name has entered folklore and even popular music. The city of Charleston, South Carolina, was the entry port for many slaves of Kongo-Angolan origin. Just between the years 1755 and 1740, for example, 70 percent of all slaves arriving at Charleston were from Angola (Thompson and Cornet 1981). The turkey vulture’s special powers and connections to Kongo-based practices like root work (folk medicine) and charms live on in the name Dr. Buzzard, a famous root doctor of St. Helens Island, off the coast of South Carolina, who was especially famous for his work involving court cases (and getting people out of jail). The name passed into the title of the 1970s disco band Dr. Buzzard’s Original Savannah Band.

Congo and Gangá Songs

Besides the general “congo” appellation, these songs bear the name of another Afro-Cuban ethnic group, the Ganga Nyongóbi, a Bantu-speaking people identified as the Nyong, a subgroup of the Puku, from the Nigerian plateau north of the Bight of Biafra (Castellanos and Castellanos 1988). They are also known in Cuba as the Congo Nyongóbi. As was mentioned in the introduction to these notes, Cabrera’s recordings sometimes function as a soundtrack to her writings, in this case to her study of Cuban Kongo religions, Reglas de Congo: Palo Monte-Mayombe (1979). In this book, she devotes several pages to Florida Pastor and her family, who lived in the town of El Perico. Pastor was the head of a Kongo firma, or spirit signature, for Siete Rayas.
closely knit extended family of a hundred people of Gangá-Nyongó CM origin, dedicated to honoring their ancestors. During wakes, they sang and danced around the corpse, which was wrapped in a sheet and laid out on the ground. They reminded it of the attention it had received from its brethren when it was alive. When the songs began, so did the possessions. Like the nádigos, from the Calabar coast, the Gangá drew designs in white chalk on the ground near the body. According to Cabrera, the Pastor family’s songs were in a mixture of old Castilian words, Bantu, and Yoruba, reflecting the mixed nature of their religion, a “cross” of Palo Monte and ocha (orisha worship) (Cabrera 1979:64–66). Of all the Afro-Cuban funerary songs, those of the Gangá were considered the most beautiful.

Tracks 23–28 performed by Florinda Pastor, Agustín Duago, and chorus

23. Shanigó
24. Oyazá obé
25. Obá o china
26. Marengue
27. Umbé
28. Vamo’ tuñe tuñe a casa mangoya

This last song bids farewell to the deceased, who is going to casa mangoya, the cemetery.

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Discography

Contains examples of of Matanzas batá, guiro, and Arará styles.


Iba Ata: Sacred Rhythms. Fundamento Productions, Victoria, B.C., Canada.


Contains additional recordings made by Cabrera and Tarafa in Havana and Matanzas.


Morton Marks is an ethnomusicologist, folklorist, and producer, specializing in the music of the Caribbean and the Lusophone world. He has been a coeditor of the Endangered Music Project on Rykodisc, and of the Alan Lomax Caribbean Voyage Series on Rounder Records. He produced two other volumes of the Lydia Cabrera–Josèfina Tarafa recordings on Smithsonian Folkways: Havana, Cuba, ca. 1577: Rhythms and Songs for the Orishas (SFW CD 40489), and Matanzas, Cuba, ca. 1957: Afro-Cuban Sacred Music from the Countryside (SFW CD 40490). His field recordings have appeared on two Folkways Records: Music of Fara, Brazil. Carnbó, Pajeú, Batuque and Umbanda (F-4285) and Afro-Dominican Music from San Cristóbal, Dominican Republic (F-3426).
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Back cover: Slaves at rest, southern Cuba, circa 1860
HAVANA & MATANZAS, CUBA, CA. 1957:
BATÁ, BEMBÉ, AND PALO SONGS

from the historic recordings of
LYDIA CABRERA and JOSEFINA TARAFÁ

These recordings, made just prior to
Fidel Castro’s rise to power, reflect
Afro-Cuban musical and spiritual life in
Havana and around the sugarcane mills
of Matanzas. Lydia Cabrera and Josefina
Tarafa captured a fascinating snapshot of
African slave-descendant communities
performing their religious songs and
ceremonies. In the Cuban countryside,
Yoruba, Dahomean, and Kongo-Angolan
religions had been faithfully preserved,
and linguistic, symbolic, and musical
elements were blended to produce new
religious expressions. These recordings
are a soundtrack to Cabrera’s writings on
Afro-Cuban religions.

28-page booklet, extensive notes, photos, 74 minutes