



Reflections Of A Percussionist

by Thomas Wingren

My batá teacher in New York, John Amira, explained to me that it usually takes around 15 years of intensive study to become an Olú batá – a musician who has mastered playing all three batá drums in all the important ceremonies. Not only that, but the musician must also be able to sing all the chants in Lucumi, a language spoken in the area around the Niger River where the batá tradition originates. And of course one must be privy to the Santería religion in order to understand the significance of the rhythms.

Not only are the batá rhythms amongst the most complex of all, the drummer is also expected to know them by heart: it wouldn't be possible to sit in front of a music stand during a religious ceremony in the Afro-Cuban tradition. When learning the rhythms, of course one can use transcriptions, but the problem is that these rhythms are very difficult to write down.

I recall when I sat sweating with my notes at Drummers Collective trying to figure out whether the rhythms John had just played for me should be written as 4/4 or 6/8. He couldn't really answer the question either since the rhythms hover between the two. However, now the rhythms are often notated in some way but it can be helpful to know that the quarter notes in 4/4 time can often be equally experienced as dotted quarter notes in a 6/8 time. Everything depends on the type of conversation carried on between the drums. It is the interchange between the drums that is pivotal, plus that the music is in sync with the "clave".

Clave is the rhythmical structure forming the basis for much of the music originating from Africa. It is like a skeleton that one adds on to with rhythmical and melodic arrangements. The clave never changes: it has the same direction throughout a composition – but the arrangement around it can change.

Clave consists of five markings and is divided into a straight and a more syncopated part. Two markings fall into the straight part of the clave and three into the syncopated part (see the second exercise at the end of this presentation). In Cuban folkloric music, the clave is clearly marked by one of the drummers, which makes it easy for the other musicians to find their place in the structure. Many of the Cuban rhythms can sound complicated to untutored ears. A good way to find your place in the rhythm is to locate the clave, then it will be much easier to understand the music.

However, clave is not only present in Cuban music. Today's music contains influences from hundreds of sources and to make a diagram of how it arises would be impossible. However, it is certain that all modern African-American music is very influenced by Cuba. Jazz would have hardly arisen in New Orleans without the influence from its neighbouring country in the south. African drums were replaced by European march instruments and some smart person put together the first drum set – perhaps to avoid having four drummers in the band ; now one lone drummer could do selected parts of the original rhythms. The rhythms have later been modified and have encountered new influences, but the clave is around the whole time. Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" is a good example of a composition which, even though it is hardly characterised by a Latin American groove, still has a clear clave in its theme.

We are used to rhythms anchored in the clave concept and we think it sounds good if the composition is "in clave", just like we are used to certain harmonies. The ordinary listener doesn't need to be familiar with the technical background of the music, but it undoubtedly makes it easier if the musicians are.

In New York's Latin quarters, "El Barrio", in east Harlem and in the Bronx, music is developed under the best possible conditions. Here the Afro-Cuban rhythms meet American jazz harmonies. It's no accident that New York is an important hub of new innovative music. To call oneself a drummer in this environment without any knowledge of clave would be a joke. Every other recording session in New York places enormous demands on the musicians' knowledge of the music's origins. Afro-Cuban influences are central here and consequently a deep spirituality reigns amongst the musicians. The spirits of Santería are present. This religion, which arose during the years of slavery in Cuba, has a strong foothold in New York, especially



amongst musicians, some of whom have come into contact with the religion through music, while others have begun to play because of the religion.

I who have mostly worked with jazz and soul musicians in Sweden, do I need to know all this? And if it takes 15 years to learn the batá tradition, how long will it take if I want to be just as good on congas, bongos, timbales, pandeiro, riq, bodhran, tar, cuica, repinique, surdo, tablas, kanjira, shekere, udu drum, etc plus know the music styles associated with these instruments? Needless to say, it would require spending over 50 years of just practicing to be able to work as a drummer. Instead of seeing this as a problem, one should perhaps be happy for the rich cultures to be unearthed during one's career. Perhaps the goal should be to work flat out when one is 25 but reach one's peak at 70.

There is hardly any improvisation when playing the batá drums. The drumming follows an ancient tradition and the musicians are serious about preserving their unique culture. A batá ensemble consists of three drummers. A batá is an hourglass shaped drum with skin on both ends. The smallest drum is called onkónkolo and its rhythms are quite monotonous. One might think then that it's easy to learn, but that's hardly the case. The role of the onkónkolo as time keeper while the other drums converse is a demanding one. The ensemble playing is very complex and the drummer playing the onkónkolo cannot get confused by the other drummers' poly-rhythmical variations.

The middle drum is called itótele and the largest is iyá. Iyá leads the conversation and decides what is going to happen. Iyá plays signals that the itótele and sometimes even the onkónkolo have to answer in accordance with traditional patterns. Personally I think that the itótele is the most difficult of the three. When one plays it one sits the whole time trying to hear when iyá gives its signals that the rhythm is to change. One cannot miss a call.

The batá tradition is divided into two parts: oru cantado and oru seco. Oru cantado is simpler to play and used together with vocals. The song technique is, like the drumming, heavily influenced by the call-response tradition. An akpwon

leads the song, and the chorus – akori - answers. The chorus often consists of drummers, and some of the drummers might even take the role of akpwon. In oru cantado one plays rhythms to a specific orisha, a spirit in the santería religion. These are mixed with rhythms that can be played for several orishas. One such rhythm is cha cha loka fun, a popular rhythm that has been used even outside the Afro-Cuban tradition.

Oru seco, however, is completely instrumental. In oru seco the rhythms are more complex and the casting between different rhythms goes quicker. Oru seco includes rhythms associated with almost all orishas. Around 50 pages of transcriptions with a wealth of rhythmic variations are gone through in about 20 minutes. Of course the best drummers don't have the music written down in front of them – they know the whole oru seco by heart.

If a drummer has considered sitting in a batá ensemble, he has then a great deal to attend to. Is it really worth it? If one wants to survive as a musician, one has to have a broad base, one must be able to fit into a variety of situations. So is it very smart to concentrate on something as time-consuming as what I have just described? I think it is. Even if in one's working life one doesn't use the batá rhythms in their traditional form, learning them is very good for developing one's rhythmic ideas; to practice poly-rhythms and understand the importance of playing together, interacting, with other musicians.

In addition to the batá, there are of course many other drumming traditions to engross oneself in. Brazilian drumming, for instance, offers just as much to study. In Brazil, as in Cuba, West African music has come together with European influences and in Brazil one also finds rhythms strongly connected to religion. Here the religion is called candomblé and has a history similar to that of santería in Cuba. It would be very easy to devote a lifetime to just studying the rhythms from Brazil.

But this is only one of many examples. One can also focus on the area around the Mediterranean where there is a powerful tradition of frame drums. A drum is a frame drum if the diameter of the skin is larger than the



depth of the drum. The Italian tamburello and various Spanish and Portuguese pandeiros have strong bonds with frame drums from North Africa and the Middle East. Drums such as the tar, riq, bendir, and ghaval have several similarities to the European instruments. The technique here is highly developed. The fingers have different tasks and by using this finger technique one can achieve very rapid and complex combinations with only one hand.

Studying frame drums is time-consuming but very stimulating. It is fascinating with an instrument that is so small and handy but when played correctly has the register of a drum set. It is fun to play these drums in public because people are always surprised at the sounds coming out of them.

There are many different kinds of frame drums from the Middle East and all the way to India, and when you arrive in India, you have probably reached the most developed drum culture in existence. Watching a tabla player from northern India or a master of the south Indian frame drum kanjira is an almost unreal experience. But these musicians have also been born into a tradition. They have often inherited the role of musician and spent many years in cloister-like schools where they perfect their technique. It feels unjust to compare western musicians with them; the prerequisites are totally different. One of the world's best drummers is Karaikudi R. Mani from southern India. He plays the mridangam, a drum which like the batá, has skin on both ends. When I saw him in a concert in Stockholm in 2001 he was 56 years old and explained that he had been studying the drum full time since the age of five. And then he added in all modesty, "and I still consider myself a student".

To be a musician in the West means that most of the jobs one gets are within the commercial pop music industry, where the role of the drum is different. It should ornament music that has no particular relationship to a culture and therefore has not been composed with specific rhythms in mind. Here the drum is the ornament and not the core - for good and bad. This gives the drummer enormous freedom to do what he or she wants to a degree - and most often with success. A drummer who works with pop music of course needs technical training, otherwise he or she won't even get the right sound out of the instrument. However, one need not know in detail how traditional folkloric music should be played - it is more important to have general musical skills, have a natural feel for what to play when, and to be able to melt in naturally with the other musicians. But if you should land in a situation where a bandleader asks you to play a guaguanco in his jazz arrangement, it probably wouldn't be a bad thing to have some more varied and in-depth studies behind you.

In my opinion a really good drummer should know about traditions and also have the ability to use his or her knowledge in a tasteful way in popular music. This is not all that simple. Of course, there are masses of examples of drummers, schooled in pop music, who have made fools of themselves in more demanding situations where their deficiencies have been obvious. But there are also problems when good folk musicians cannot find a place for themselves in a more modern context. A Cuban conguero is used to playing hard and being the driving force in the music, but to be able to play the congas in jazz or soul requires another approach and it's not certain the drummer will manage that just because he is a fantastic drummer brought up in the Cuban tradition. In the West a good drummer should be able to play pop, soul, jazz and also be able to participate in several different traditional contexts. Those having these qualities have often been in the business a good while and they practice every day in order to continue to develop.

To develop involves looking both backwards and forwards in one's studies. To test new ideas and break old patterns is important for musical development. It can be difficult to know what is "allowed" and not allowed to do. In the beginning of my studies the strong traditions within percussion made me so frightened of doing something wrong that I didn't dare improvise. This might have also been because I had just begun serious studies in New York where the Afro-Cuban tradition is taken in deadly earnest. Several years later, when I was in Santiago de Cuba to deepen my knowledge of batá, I saw that people were much easier about what was right and wrong. Naturally there were rules to follow but the tone was more relaxed than in New York's grimly tough music climate. A good drummer stands on safe ground with traditional knowledge and is good at converting these into new ideas without necessarily breaking with the logical connections which many old established rhythms possess.



In today's modern society music is generally hardly considered an academic subject demanding lengthy study. Young people who are interested in developing their musical abilities prefer to apply for a 5-week music course in the form of a docu-soap production on TV than to the established colleges of music. Yet if the goal is to become a famous artist it may be a correct choice since present-day technology, with pre-recorded music and vocal auto-tuning in real time is the rule rather than the exception in concerts. Musical knowledge no longer determines careers, and unfortunately this has caused a depreciation of the music profession. It doesn't matter if one has 10 years of education, for if one nevertheless is forced to alternate low paid jobs in small clubs with the being on the dole, one does not land very high up on the social ladder. Being an academic means that one is, for example, a doctor, an engineer, an economist or a lawyer. Who would ever think that a percussionist could have an equally long and demanding education?

Some people picture playing drums as rather simple - that it involves simply hitting a little here and there as the spirit moves you. On several occasions I have met people who have been surprised at the fact that there are any notes at all for percussion – more or less as if there's nothing much one needs to remember.

This is not really a problem and one can console oneself with the fun involved in showing off very good drummers for those not accustomed to seeing them. One can impress people with rhythms which in other cultures would simply be considered basic, fundamental skills.

However, problems do arise in contexts when one works with musicians with insufficient knowledge. Many full time musicians can hardly differentiate between music from Cuba and Brazil – it's all "latin". I'm fairly sure that musicians in Brazil don't believe that there's any difference between Swedish and Greek folk music – it's all just "European" – but that doesn't make matters any better. If one wants to arrange a composition with, for instance Cuban influences, it is absolutely necessary that everyone involved can handle the rhythmic structure that should permeate the composition. All instruments are building blocks and should fit together. If any instrumentalist doesn't understand this, the playing won't work. What then is lacking is knowledge of clave and how one should relate to it as a musician.

The world of percussion is so enormous that there is the risk that one will always feel like a beginner no matter how much or long one studies. I'm the first to admit that when I began my more serious studies at the Drummers Collective 10 years ago I thought I was a pretty good drummer. I just needed to polish my technique a bit. At that point I'd already been involved in some recordings and had quite a lot of experience playing live. But already in the first week at the school I understood I didn't know a thing – and the knowledge I did have was almost an obstacle for development. John Amira, Bobby Sanabria and Duduka da Fonseca at the Drummers Collective were tough teachers and even if I went through many agonizing lessons I am grateful for their mercilessness in order to get my musical development on the right track.

I'll soon go there again, or maybe I'll go to Azerbaijan and study the ghaval. On the other hand, the Jola people's solo drum tradition, bougarabou, in West Africa also sounds interesting. We'll see what happens.

To conclude, I thought I'd show a few exercises. Practicing poly-rhythms is very important for a drummer and the most common poly-rhythmic exercise is to play 3 against 2.

Foot	1		2		3	
Clap	1			2		

The clave I described earlier exists in different forms. One is called son clave since it comprises the basis for the rhythms in son music which comes from eastern Cuba. Another is called rumba clave, which is used in most of the rumba styles which were developed in the harbour districts in Matanzas just east of Havana.



These two aren't much different from each other. The last marking on the syncopated side, the 3 side, is shifted forward 1/16 note in the rumba-clave compared with the son-clave.

When arranging music one can have clave as a foundation in two ways. Either one lets the first beat fall with the 2 side or the 3 side. If one has written a composition in 3/2, the first beat will coincide with the first marking on the 3 side. The exercise below is a 3/2 clave.

Foot	1				2				3				4			
Clap	1			2			3				1		2			

If that was easy, here is an additional exercise which will probably frustrate a few of you. I have combined a poly-rhythmic exercise with a clave in 6/8 time. In 6/8 the clave is usually played with 2 pick-up notes which I have marked with an x in the exercise.

Foot	1		2		3		4		5		6	
Left hand	1			2			3			4		
Right hand	1		2		x	3		1		2		x

Translation to English by Jan Teeland