

A Gendered Tone: Representations of Sexuality and Power in Cuban *Batá* Performance

Vicky Jassev
Cardiff University, Wales
jassev@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract: *Fundamento* or *Añá* are the three hour-glass consecrated *batá* drums central to the worship of the *orichas* (deities) in Cuban Santería and belong to initiated heterosexual men. Taboos prevent women and homosexual males from coming into close proximity with these sacred objects. Thirty years ago however, Cuban men began teaching women to play non-consecrated *batá* called *aberikulá*. Three decades later there are now six all-female *batá* groups and a growing contingent of female *batá* players in Cuba. Furthermore, in Santiago in 2015, women started playing *fundamento batá* in a historical break from tradition. There has been extensive research **focusing on men's sacred** *batá* performance and its associated religious and cultural practices but in-depth studies which focus on gender and the growing number of female *batá* players have been few. Addressing gender asymmetry, this article examines representations of power and sexuality in male/female, sacred/secular *batá* performance.

Keywords: *Batá*, Gender, Sexuality, Performance

Although I had been performing in ritual and secular *batá* performances¹ for twelve years in the UK, there had only ever been two *tambores* (religious musical ceremonies) using *fundamento*². However, by the time I returned from my Cuban field trip where I had been researching gender and *batá* in October 2015, a second set³ of consecrated *batá* had arrived in my home city of London in June 2015. Previously there had been on average one *tambor* a year on *aberikulá*. Crispin Robinson, the owner of this second set of *fundamento* has already delivered six *tambores* **in the first nine months of the drums'** arrival. His social spheres, religious commitment and musical knowledge have revived a sense of purpose, authenticity and cohesion among the religious and musical community. With the arrival of these sacred instruments however, come their gender prohibitions, meaning female *batá* players like myself are no longer able to play alongside men in ritual settings. I had experienced many *tambores* in Europe and Cuba and thought I fully understood the gender prohibition⁴. I now realise the taboo existed as an orientalist (Said 1977) conception in my head. It has taken seeing the gender divides and hierarchies imported and transposed onto my local musical community, and finding myself an **'outsider' where I had previously been an 'insider' for the 'taboo concept' to become** tangible and real. Needless to say, as a female *batá* player and feminist I am implicated in my research. My deep interest in the sacro-socio-political power of the *batá* drums and the profound music they inspire goes over and above academic interest alone. This research draws on eight months of auto-ethnographic, practice-based research in Cuba (2014-2015) and twelve years of secular and ritual *batá* performance. By relating two ethnographic vignettes this article explores constructs of gender, power and sexuality. In addition, I demonstrate how *batá* performance in the sacred/secular domain inverts gender binaries of female = private/domestic, male = public/culture (Koskoff 2014: 23). **Further, I query whether women's secular** *batá* performance is a counterpoint to male hegemony in the sacred tradition.

Male-Sacred-Private

In a tradition passed from generation to generation the heterosexual male brotherhood, *omo Añá*, are entrusted with *fundamento*, their vast musical corpus and secrets of their making and maintenance. Whilst not all drum owners are drummers or know the secrets of making *fundamento*, those that can perform both roles wield greater power in the

¹ *Batá* drumming is almost always accompanied by singing, clapping, dancing, spirit possession and ritual **tropes. I use the term 'batá performance' to encapsulate the entire musical event.**

² The first *tambor* in the U.K took place on 9th February 2009. The second was in 2011. Both used the *fundamento* belonging to a Cuban drummer and Ifá priest Javier Campos who lives in Paris.

³ The first set of *fundamento* to live in the U.K arrived on 4th February 2014 and belongs to Jorge Armando de **Armas Sarria 'Gerardo'. To my knowledge this set has not yet been played in a *tambor*.**

⁴ This is largely connected to taboos surrounding menstruation.

community with better access to income from ritual performance, the hiring out of the drums, making and selling new sets of *batá* and teaching foreigners to play. Gender prohibitions form one part of a series of taboos integral to these sacred drums. Drum owners and other initiated drummers guard the **“sacred space and ritual secrets with ferocity”** (Villegastour 2015: 160) **from contamination by the ‘unclean’: women, homosexuals and men who have had sex with a woman within 24 hours before a *tambor*. *Fundamento* are ‘born’ following a weeklong ritual where the deity Añá is brought to life and placed inside the drum vessels. On the final day there is a public ‘transmission’ ceremony where an older set of *fundamento* are played in order to transmit spiritual energy to the new set. One by one the older drums, whilst being played, are replaced with the new drums.**

Drum Transmission at La Corea, La Habana

The three drummers sat playing the older set of *fundamento* while the new set, with **shining wood and clean looking skins, lay on a mat at the drummers’ feet. Forming a tight semi-circle, Cuban and foreign initiated drummers and *babalawos* (divining priests) and two women, a French woman and myself, packed into the small front room. Facing the drummers everybody joined in singing and clapping with all our focus directed towards the drummers and of course the new drums soon to be played. The excitement was palpable. Part of the way through, four women from the house who had earlier been preparing food came in and stood at the back of the room. Smiling, laughing and dancing they stayed only for a short while and then left, leaving once again the French woman and myself as the only two women in the room full of male priests, drummers and drum owners. (Field notes 23/06/2016)**

This ethnographic vignette provides an example of how the space surrounding the Añá drums can be gendered and delimited

Space and Gender Organisation During Drum Transmission

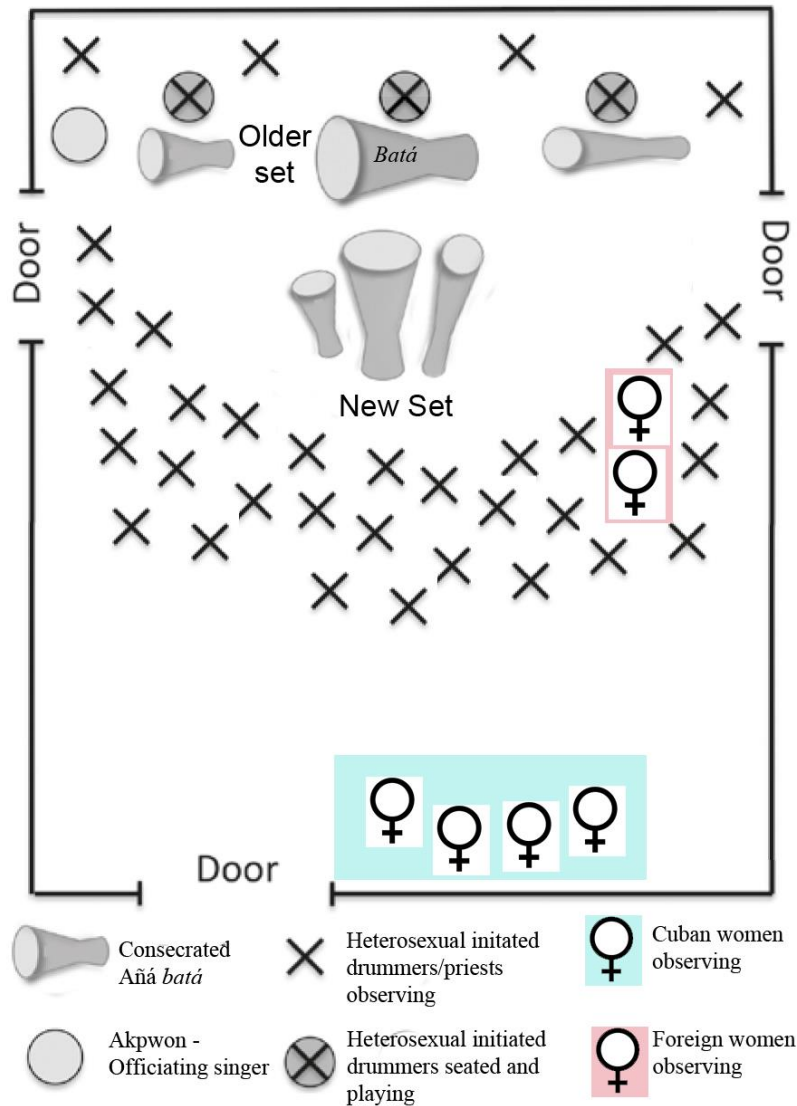


Figure I. Diagram adapted from Kenneth Schweitzer (2015: 185).

Gender stratifications can be seen on a continuum and are relational to Añá who resides at the nexus of power. To clarify this gradation I have adapted a diagram first produced by Katherine Hagedor (2015: 185). This diagram provides an overview⁵ of how access (musical knowledge, experience, secrets) and power (status, access to income) in the Añá fraternity is delimited by gender and sexuality.

⁵ There are fluctuations and deviations to this model especially with regards to negotiations of power between foreign initiated drum owners/drummers and Cuban initiated drummers.

Sacred *Batá* Performance: Access to Knowledge & Power



*Although women and EPHs can be officiating singers and dancers this diagram is a representation of their relational access to Añá. I have placed EPH's furthest from the apex because I have not yet met or heard of any EFH batá drummers. Why this may be is a topic for further research.

(Hagedorn 2015: 185)

Figure II. Sacred *Batá* Performance: Access to Knowledge & Power

Moshe Morad explains that sexual identity in Cuba is based on conceptions related to **behaviour and sexual roles and identifies two 'social-sex' categories: Feminine = EPH** (effeminate penetrated homosexuals) and women; Masculine = Men, masculine lesbians, and insertive partners in male-to-male sex (Dianteill 2000 cited in Morad 2015: 160). It is these fluid conceptions, associated with male-to-male sex, that cause pronounced anxiety around sexual identity in Cuban society generally (Allen 2011: 126; Morad 2015: 160) and **the Santería community specifically. Women and homosexuals become 'outsiders' as** tension between female sexuality and Añá provides conceptualized male and female zones in the physical space. These zones are policed by the brotherhood (Schweitzer 2015: 184) and expand and contract depending on many variables: type of *tambor*, attitudes of the drummers and female/homosexual devotees, size of ritual space, etc. Women who live with or are around Añá frequently, like the women in this vignette, grow **up being told to move away from the sacred drums. They learn to 'know their place' and maintain the 'female zone' through repeated embodied practice (Farnell 1999) of keeping** their distance. This in part can explain why the Cuban women of the house may have stood at the back of the room. Foreign women become re-gendered (Block 2008)

meaning they have marginally more access to the 'male zone' as demonstrated in fig.1, partly because they are transient visitors and are not seen as a threat to the status quo. The men in the room during this drum transmission were all initiated drummers, drum owners and/or Ifá priests and therefore identify as heterosexual. "Hombría (manhood) is among the most prized values in [Cuban] society because it is always already constitutive **of honor, dignity, strength, and bravery, the 'opposite' of homosexuality**" (Allen 2011: 126). Access to religious power is dependent on *hombria*, **the performing of a 'heterosexual masculine script'**⁶. Patriarchal religious, hetero-normative ideologies form part of a broader gamut of sacro-socio-political processes where heteronationalism becomes a foundational requirement of anti-colonial nation building (Lazarus 2011: 82, Beliso-De Jesús 2015). An opinion highlighted by Angel Pedro Bolaños Corrales, a renowned elder of the Añá fraternity who explained:

"If an effeminate person comes here with 20,000 CUC [Cuban currency] wanting a drum, he'd be off back down the stairs not on his feet but on his hands [...] Money has corrupted the men here. They sell themselves. That's like being a traitor to your country." (Pers. comm. 04/08/2015)

Although research has been limited within the Cuban gay Santería community, Morad explains, EPHs do not appear to contest their subordinate position in relation to the Añá drumming fraternity (2015: 167), unlike the growing number of female *batá* players in Cuba.

Female-Secular-Private

Women were prohibited from learning and playing any *batá* drums until the early 1980s, after which some ritual drummers agreed to teach foreign women and some years later Cuban women on *aberikulá*. Since this time there has been a steady progression towards **what I call the 'batalera frontline', a conceptual continuum where women are progressively moving nearer to greater equality in *batá* performance.**

⁶ **One drummer explained how on the day he was 'sworn' (initiated) to Añá he** was issued with a list of names considered to be Cuban homosexual drum owners. He was told that he must not play with anyone on the list. If he did he would be blacklisted and denied access to playing with the reputable Añá houses. (pers. comm., Antoine Miniconi 04/02/2016)

The Batalera Frontline

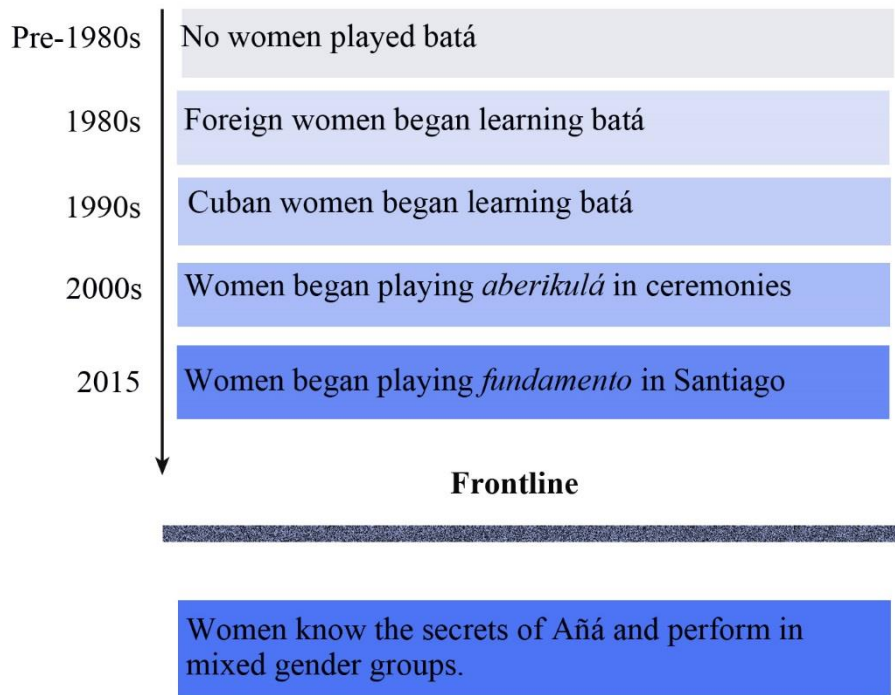


Figure III. The Batalera Frontline

Although Cuban women remain prohibited from playing Añá drums it appears more are learning to play and many now speak openly of their desire to play consecrated drums in ritual settings⁷. The following vignette offers a snapshot from an internationally acclaimed all-female, secular performance group, Obini Batá (see Rodriguez 2014; Hagedorn 2015) who are subsidised by the state.

Obini Batá Performance – Yoruba Association, Havana 2015

The three *batá* drummers and the lead singer stood in front of me, their white dresses and headscarves evocative of **'folkloric' ritual attire. I marvelled at how lucky I was to be invited** to film Obini Batá at such close distance. Standing slightly behind and to the right I was within touching distance of the drums. They cut a striking image as they played the three *batá* on stands, standing in a row, their powerful arms lifting and falling dramatically as their drumming filled the room. Their smiles were fixed as they gazed defiantly ahead. The female dancer, dressed as the male *orisha* Elegua, filled the large performance area with colour and energy as he interacted with an audience made up mostly of tourists eagerly

⁷ During my field research, fifteen out of nineteen female *batá* players I interviewed expressed a desire to play consecrated drums. Their willingness to publicly convey these desires appears to be a recent development according to previous research (see Flores 2001, Vincent [Villepastour] 2006).

taking photos. Set amid the beautiful cavernous colonial building, Obini Batá's presence conveyed strength and elegance. (Field notes 5/09/2015).

Permission to film at such close quarters stood in stark contrast to my experiences in male-sacred-private *batá* performance, where female prohibitions prevented me getting too close or behind the sacred drums. Initially, the inverted binaries of female-secular-public *batá* performance give an impression of gender hegemony rebalancing. Certainly the rhetoric from some academic discourse and journalism promotes Obini Batá as representing a subversive counterpoint to the male sacred musical tradition (see Scherpf 2011; Rodriguez 2014; Hagedorn 2015). **Further, Eva Despaigne, Obini Batá's director explains, "We are representing the importance of women, confronting the ancestral machismo that exists." (pers. comm., 30/08/2014). However, below the surface of this** collective rhetoric another picture emerges, one which also reveals anxieties over sexual identity, mirroring that of the male-sacred domain.

I don't have to act like a man for them to pay attention to me. No, I am a woman [...] I have already explained to you **that this isn't the case for many female groups who wear men's costumes and things like that, horrible things, or are lesbians for example,** in order to get recognition. (Pers. comm., Eva Despaigne 31/08/2015)

The international success of a lesbian identified all-female *batá* group, Ibbu Okun, who **started at a similar time as Obini Batá, may play some part in Despaigne's need to** demonstratively identify the group as heterosexual. Further, many female *batá* players have been accused of being lesbian by male *batá* players, heightening the need for heterosexual female players to publicly define and defend their sexual orientation. Nagybe Pouymiro, a *batá* **player and leading campaigner for women's rights to play consecrated drums condemned homosexuality as "impure" and "unnatural", and complained that "despite that La Ocha [Santería] is full of gays" (pers. comm., 06/08/2014). Many all-**female *batá* groups demonstrate a heterosexual identity through hyper-feminine tropes and visual aesthetic.



Figure IV. Obini Batá 1996/97: Eva Despaigne, Dayami Pelladito, Deborah Carmen Mendez Frontela, Mirtha Ocanto (photo courtesy of Frontela 2015).

For example, Obini Batá play *batá* on stands and later in their show play congas whilst seated with their legs crossed. Although neither position is considered traditional

Despaigne suggests it is ‘for a touch of feminine distinction’ (pers. comm., 31/08/2014).

During one performance I witnessed a conga drum roll over when a performer lost control **whilst trying to play seated with her legs crossed. At odds in some ways with Despaigne’s assertion that they ‘confront ancestral machismo’, I argue that by employing hyper-feminine tropes and self-segregating, all-female *batá* ensembles reinforce their social and musical subordination. ‘Hyper-feminine’ is diametrically opposite to ‘hyper-masculine’,** thus perpetuating simple binaries, including heterosexual-homosexual.

Female *batá* performance therefore, remains in female designated spaces away from the male gaze (Doubleday 2008: 16). Although Obini Batá enjoys international and national attention they are largely ignored by the Añá brotherhood⁸ allowing for marginalizing practices limiting female access to ritual musical domains, musical knowledge and training, to continue un-challenged. My privileged position as a foreigner provided several opportunities for me to meet and play *batá* alongside many initiated players in Cuba, in both secular and ritual sites on non-consecrated drums⁹. I appeared to act as a bridge **between male and female ‘zones’. For example, my ability to play often instigated debate** on gender and *batá* among initiated drummers without me bringing it up. Further, I have now met four drum owners and several male initiated drummers who confided that they do not agree with the female gender taboo or some aspects of the taboo.¹⁰ They all explained

⁸ Most of the initiated *batá* players I spoke with had heard of Obini Batá but had never seen them play.

⁹ Performances include dance classes at Teatro America (2014 & 2015) and *tambores* playing *aberikula* (2015) in private home situations.

¹⁰ Some drummers explained they did not understand why women could not play once they had reached their menopause.

however, that they do not contest the status quo out of respect for the tradition and fear of being ostracized.

In conclusion, secular and sacred *batá* drumming is a locus of sacro-socio power. Physical and metaphysical space around the drums becomes delimited into male and **female zones. Access is largely governed by gender and sexuality or one's ability to perform a 'heterosexual masculine script'. As women's *batá* performance does not operate outside of patriarchal heteronationalist social processes, their performance continues to embody, reinforce and maintain the hegemonic status quo.**

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