Umi Vaughan & Carlos Aldama

Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá: Cuba, Diaspora, and the Drum. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. xx + 179 pp. (Paper US\$ 25.00)

According to a Yoruba proverb, “A journey is never so pleasant that the traveler does not return home.” So it is with this book by Umi Vaughan and Carlos Aldama. The coauthors track the transplantation of *batá* drumming from West Africa to Cuba in the early nineteenth century, its evolution on the island, its onward journey to the United States since the 1970s, and current practice among *batá* communities particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some in the latter context seek connection with “universal human values and emotions” (p. 146) and others, particularly African Americans like Vaughan, seek “the Africa within” (p. 147).

The book's acknowledgments are a who's who of *batá* practice. This is to be expected for Aldama, who commands legendary status as a drummer, while Vaughan has clearly become connected to a wide community of specialists. Their respect for *batá* drumming is reflected in the care they take to present it with elegance and sophistication. Vaughan describes his attempt to represent Aldama's testimony in its original vibrancy, and “cut, cut, and cut away at our six-year conversation to make it fit between the covers of this book” (p. 11). What remains is a reflexive and illuminating window into a powerful yet often misunderstood musical and spiritual tradition, and the journeys that Aldama and Vaughan have made through its past, present, and future.

Chapters 1–3 present Aldama's insights into the early development of *batá* drumming, complemented by Vaughan's contextual analyses of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the transmission of Yoruba culture to Cuba, and the tensions between Afro-Cuban religious expression (particularly Santería) and the Revolutionary government of Fidel Castro. The narrative never drifts far from the journey of the *batá* drums (*okónkolo*, *itótele*, and *iyá*) from Yorubaland to Havana, Matanzas, and Santiago de Cuba, and the subsequent evolution of their practice and pedagogy. Aldama's advice on performance technique, such as using improvisation to demonstrate one's vitality (*estar presente*) (p. 26), is valuable information for readers who also play the *batá*. His stories about the founding fathers of Cuban *batá* drumming bring the fragments of lore one hears on the streets of Havana into a coherent and authoritative historiography. Only somebody who grew up at the source, apprenticed in his case to the master drummer Jesús Pérez, could relate this level of detail.

Vaughan does well to select, convey, and interpret Aldama's stories. Whereas more pedantic (and probably less experienced) outsiders go to great pains to pinpoint “correct” *batá* practice and technique, Vaughan is comfortable and

confident enough to acknowledge the flexibility of tradition: “In the end, it seems that the reactions of the community of *santeros* and the *oricha* [saints] themselves determine which changes are acceptable and/or become part of the vocabulary of the drum” (p. 38).

Chapter 4, on diaspora, will resonate on a personal level with many readers. Vaughan uses the term to describe three communities: Cubans in and outside the island, people of African descent wherever they may live, and those interested in the *batá* drums regardless of their ethnicity and background. Readers may or may not be Cuban and/or of African descent, but if this book is in their hands they belong to the latter diaspora. By implicating readers in the ongoing development of *batá* history, the chapter invites us to think about who we are and why we care. As Vaughan puts it: “Who owns the tradition? Who knows more? What gives you the right?” (p. 100). Aldama laments the scarcity of opportunities in the San Francisco Bay Area to play authentic *batá* ceremonies at the level of intensity he knew in Cuba: “Why should I kill myself practicing all that if I have nowhere to use it?” (p. 109). This is a common dilemma for *batá* drummers outside Cuba, and one that further provokes readers (most with even less performance opportunities than Aldama) to reflect on their purpose.

Chapter 5, “Drum Lesson,” offers tuition in *batá* technique and flow, as well as insights to carry students through the years required to become proficient. As a sworn *batá* drummer, I appreciated Vaughan’s homage to patience: “understanding and enlightenment ... follow initial bewilderment” (p. 113). Learning some things and remembering others, I enjoyed Aldama’s gems of insight, such as the technique of borrowing or quoting specific rhythmic phrases from Eleguá, Ogun, Obatalá, and other *orichas* within improvised sections of Yemayá and Changó. The mp3 audio files that accompany the book, easily downloaded from the Indiana University Press website, are useful for illustrating these points.

Chapter 6 and the conclusion consider the current direction of *batá* drumming inside and outside Cuba. Aldama discusses the qualities he seeks in students: “I’ll teach those who deserve it. But not just any and everybody. There are many who play *batá* and I pay them no attention, because they don’t love it. They see it like a slave master sees slaves as an object ... They could be nice people, but they will never really have it” (p. 142). Readers—practitioners especially—will again find themselves reflecting on what it is that draws them to the *batá* drums and why.

Those with some experience of Afro-Cuban Santería will feel comfortable with Aldama’s testimony, which is peppered with vernacular terms and references. Readers without prior exposure may feel challenged at times, but if they are sincerely interested in *batá* drumming, feeling challenged will be nothing

new. Vaughan and Aldama are well suited as coauthors: one is young and hungry; the other is mature and content to see the *batá* legacy passed on. Anyone taking the journey alongside them, whether just setting out on the drummer's path or seeking to reconnect with humanity and "home," will find this book to be an indispensable guide.

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