Kenneth Schweitzer


Contributing to a growing wave of literature on Afro-Cuban ritual practice, Kenneth Schweitzer sets out to tread a line between ethnographic narrative and musical analysis of sacred Afro-Cuban *batá* drumming. This is a delicate and challenging topic, bound up in the cultural survival of Yoruba-descended Cubans through history, and in the expression of Afro-Cuban spirituality today.

Schweitzer is forthright about his approach: “I am more concerned here with ritual actions than with belief and theology” (p. 62). The statement reflects what has become anthropological best practice—to focus on subjects’ actions instead of what they might be thinking, and in this way avoid imposing external interpretations. He executes this discursive technique with care in his descriptions of the events and actions in question. Using excerpts from his research diary as a tool for analyzing *batá* ritual practice, he shows that first impressions can be misleading. For instance, musical mistakes committed by new *batá* initiates are not in fact mistakes, but rather an expected facet of ceremonial practice that encourages drummers to develop their skills.

Schweitzer identifies discrepancies in the transcriptions and interpretations published by previous Western researchers of *batá* drumming, noting that “The authors’ conceptual approaches predictably diverge, creating very distinct pictures of the structural system of the same music … contrasting views can help illustrate the multiple layers of meaning encoded within the structure of *batá* [practice]” (p. 69). He proposes that *batá* *toques* (rhythmic patterns performed together on the three *batá* drums) reflect a continuum. At one extreme are “one-to-one” *toques* that explicitly refer to one Yoruba deity, and at the other “one-to-all” *toques* that are more flexible. Much of the dispute about “correct” *batá* performance, he argues, stems from different understandings of this continuum.

Among the musical approaches described in the book are those of the late master drummer Pancho Quinto, with whom Schweitzer studied in the United States and Cuba in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Chapter 5 features a biographical account of Pancho’s teaching and performance style, illuminating the life and times of this legendary figure of Afro-Cuban percussion.

The book picks apart the musical teaching and learning techniques that Schweitzer observed during his studies. His meticulous transcriptions and diagrams illuminate aspects of *batá* drumming that might otherwise pass unnoticed. For example, his spatial analysis of seating positions shows how the left
and right hands of the outer two drummers emphasize metronomic time to the lead drummer seated between them. Chapters 6 and 7 put an elusively simple toque called ñongo under the microscope through detailed—almost scientific—comparison of iconic recordings by Los Muñequisitos de Matanzas, Orlando “Puntilla” Ríos, and Abbilona. These case studies may constitute the most detailed study of batá drumming published to date, and in this regard the book expands what Schweitzer calls “Lucumí scholarship” (p. 8).

As I read the case studies and analyses I wondered about the evolution and significance of “Lucumí scholarship.” That such a field exists suggests an intellectual community whose members may or may not harbor personal interests and spiritual connections with Yoruba-based cosmology. If batá drumming is an inherently spiritual endeavor as Schweitzer acknowledges, it strikes me that those who approach it with purely academic motivations may unwittingly limit their capacity to learn. I am unsure, then, about the merits of anthropological best practice (i.e. objective and scientific observation) for understanding something as personally involved and historically meaningful as batá drumming.

Reflexivity on the part of the “Lucumí scholarship” community may help to deal with this problem. It would have been instructive, for instance, to learn whether Schweitzer’s inspirations for studying batá drumming were purely academic or if they intersected with personal or spiritual considerations, and how his motivations affected the way he collected and analyzed “the data.” This epistemological issue will no doubt resurface as political rapprochement between Havana and Washington opens the way for more U.S. students to learn batá drumming.

I think Schweitzer would agree that the best way to deepen one’s knowledge of batá drumming is to study it in its performative context. Given that many readers may not have this opportunity, or are perhaps preparing for it, this book is a good first step. I have already recommended it to a student hungry to learn more, and have advised the same student to reflect upon the goals he wants to achieve through his study, why these goals are important to him, and how he might introduce these reflections into his writing.

Adrian H. Hearn
Department of Spanish and Latin American Studies, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia
a.hearn@unimelb.edu.au