

The Religion to Beat: A Look at the Importance of Drums in Vodou

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In Vodou ceremonies the reverberating beats of the drums help those present to let their bodies go to the rhythms and make their bodies and minds receptive to the *lwa*. To an outsider the powerful drums might appear to cause people to dance insensibly (Wilcken 2005: 193). But to a Vodouist, ritual dancing is integral to life and to be without it would be insensible. Vodouists exalt *ounto* in all meanings of the word: the drums, the drummer and the *lwa* that represent the drums (Hebblethwaite 2012: 34).

Drums are not necessary for possession but they do provide music to dance to and “get down with the spirits” (Wilcken 2005: 194). Traditionally Vodou music includes percussion but for example in pop Vodou music, otherwise known as *rasin* or “roots”, uses other instruments as well (Hebblethwaite 2012: 31). A lot of energy is necessary to bring forth the *lwa* and to allow the *chwal* to enter trance and the drums can help to instill some of this energy in the crowd (Wilcken 2005: 195). In *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Mama Lola tries to keep her ceremonies quiet so clapping is used for rhythm keeping (Brown 2001: 136). This in no way diminishes the power of the ceremonies. The author, Brown (2001: 61), describes a certain ceremony where Mama Lola was “playing on our energies as if we were her musical instrument.”

Vodou rites take place at night and can include nine hours of non-stop drumming, dancing and singing in order to serve the spirits (Landry 2008: 54). The drummers pound away and the dancers dance around the *potomitan* in the hopes one of them will be chosen as a *chwal* and mounted by the *lwa* (Hebblethwaite 2012:24). Each Vodou rhythm produces an “anti-rhythm” called a *kase*, or “break” in Creole. At some point during the rite, the lead drummer will begin a beat that goes against the current beat. This under cutting beat can physically disorient the dancer for a moment, which can lead to mounting by the *lwa* (Wilcken 2005: 195). This break in rhythm is called a break instead of a pause because dancing continues on through the *kase* as the dancers reorient themselves. These moments of rupture in rhythm are actually more representative of a change in the direction of the music and the dancer, which is why the songs seem to flow smoothly despite the breaks in rhythm. The songs progress forward in phases in a zig-zag moving toward possession as the people dance in a circular motion around the *potomitan* (Laroche 1992:800-801). The rhythm may cease but it is in these moments when human and spiritual activities intensify.

At every ceremony individual spirits are beckoned for by performing a series of three or seven songs in strict order based on what rhythms would normally go along with that spirit (Brown 2001: 55). The song both calls forth the specific *lwa* and also expresses what is desired of the *lwa* (Hebblethwaite 2012:31). There are different rhythms associated with Rada, Kongo-Petwo rites but all of them demonstrate unique complex rhythms played simultaneously. *Yanvalou* (which can be associated with a group of spirits), *twarigol mayi* and *zepòl* are all Rada rhythms typified by regular ongoing rhythms. Typical Rada drums are made from hard wood, with cow skin tops tied down by stakes. They include the big *oun* or *manman tanbou* (the mother drum), the medium *ounto* or *segon* (second), and the small *ountoki* or *boula* played with a curved stick and a straight stick. The deep tones of the mother drum ease tensions and allow for submission to the *lwa* but it is the *kase* that literally breaks the rhythm open so that the *lwa* may enter.

Kongo-Petwo drums are made from soft wood and goatskin and the rhythms are more fierce and stirring and consist of *kita*, *sech*, *kita mouve*, *boumba* and *kingo sosyete*. In Petwo rites two drums are used: the *ti baka* or little goblin and the *gwo baka* or big goblin. In Kongo and Rada rites there are typically three drums used, but for ceremonies of mass proportions several drums may be used (Hebblethwaite 2012: 33).

The drums create entrancing rhythms that give the dancer the opportunity to give into the rhythms and separate from the physical body while the noise of the shaking *ason* is meant to persuade the spirits into taking over the physical bodies (Brown 2001: 69). The *ason* is a rhythm instrument that when shaken by an *oungan* or *manbo* appeases the *lwa* through the sound of the porcelain beads and snake vertebrae strung together clashing against a calabash gourd (Hebblethwaite 2012: 32). In this way, the drums create an environment of dancers lost in the music, receptive to possession; an offer a *lwa* can hardly refuse (Hebblethwaite 2012: 31). The drums and the *ason* are both mediums utilized by practitioners, priests, and priestesses to speak to and learn from the *lwa*.

At a ritual, Landry (2008: 54) observed the vigor of the drummers and the complexity of the rhythms they created. He describes how the throbbing drums eventually reverberated throughout every person and item in the temple until they all moved as one being with the drums beating as the heart (Landry 2008:55). But it is not necessary for all to move as one, there is no set way to dance (Laroche 1992: 800). In Vodou, traditions are not set in stone, they are just now being put into writing. Vodou is a religion that is open to interpretation and creolization so the number of drums, the type of drums, and other various details vary as much as the drummers who play them. But, the tradition of drum playing and the use of the *kase* as a way to trigger possession are traditions that will not easily be broken.

Bibliography

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