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Framing the Question: Learning How to Learn from the Drum¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the dimensions of my experiences as an initiated member of Omo-aña, consecrated players of the Afro-Cuban sacred batá drum, an instrument that originated in Yorubaland in Nigeria, West Africa, and traveled to Cuba in the 1800s. I will describe the evolving process of learning to play the batá under the guidance of one of the most influential Olubata—keepers of the sacred batá—in the United States, my cultural consultant, Orlando “Puntilla” Rios. The guiding question is: How can I use frame analysis as a tool in thinking about my own learning process, and by extension, to deconstruct the dominant frames to illuminate a broader range of alternatives?

Key words: learning styles, rhythm, musical language, cognition, frame analysis, oral tradition, batá.

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“What you do not know is the only thing you know”
T. S. Eliot

1.0 Introduction

Rhythm is a universal element of music, but the execution and inflection of rhythmic patterns varies considerably among cultures, and the variation is not random: it’s an expression of fundamental musical values. How do we learn about the values embedded in a musical language that is different from the one we grew up with? What is the impact of our musical assumptions and values on those we teach? I propose to address these questions by building on my personal experience of learning batá drumming. I use the concept of frame analysis to explain how we interact with new musical concepts, in effect, learning how

¹ This article is an adaptation of a chapter from my forthcoming book “Omo Anya and the Brotherhood of the Drum: The Metaculture of a Religious Community.”

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to learn.

So what are frames, and what is frame analysis? Frames are mental structures that help us understand reality and how we create with the things that we take from that reality. They facilitate our most basic understandings and interactions with the world by providing structures for our ideas and concepts. They shape the way we reason, and have a subsequent impact on how we perceive and act. Frames structure our social institutions, conventions, and cultural habits and shape them in ways that then determine how we behave and react to others whose frames may be different from ours. They are metaphors, visuals, messages, and stories that signal meaning and help us to connect new information to the “structures of understanding” that already exist in our heads. In the context of music, frames inform our ideas about everything from a given style of music—from the instruments associated with that style to the appropriate dress for the musicians performing in that style to the execution of melodic ornamentation and the accentuation of the underlying rhythmic patterns

In this essay, I explore the dimensions of my experiences as an initiated member of Omo-aña, consecrated players of the Afro-Cuban sacred batá drum, an instrument that originated in Yorubaland in Nigeria, West Africa, and traveled to Cuba in the 1800s. I will describe the evolving process of learning to play the batá under the guidance of one of the most influential Olubata-keepers of the sacred batá—in the United States, my cultural consultant, Orlando “Puntilla” Rios. The guiding question is: How can I use frame analysis as a tool in thinking about my own learning process, and by extension, to deconstruct the dominant frames to illuminate a broader range of alternatives?

1.01 The contextual framework

Musical styles, performance and traditions are complementary, but they also are different. Subsequently, the techniques and approaches that one might use to perform in a particular style may not necessarily be the same approach used to learn a tradition. On the one hand, style is something that is relatively easy to discern given the prominent place of music in our society. When we hear the music of James Brown, Phillip Glass, Ravi Shankar or Olatunji we intuitively know, based on our past musical experiences, that each piece is in a different style and serves different purposes for different people. We know this because musical style is a “kind of outer wrapping with particular markings” that helps us to make distinctions in how melody, harmony and rhythm are used in each of their unique performance styles. Therefore, style is a basic level of analysis that is listener-based, it is not the only way.

A closer examination of the technical aspects between style, the performer and the language of music tells us more. Rhythm, for example, is fundamental to all “musics” and gives life to musical form. When combined with melody, timbre, pitch and texture collectively they become invaluable tools for shaping musical sound. A composer uses these tools to create within a particular style. The performer, in Western traditions, is groomed not only to play what the composer writes, but also to play adhering to the elements of style and with feeling to demonstrate respect for the composer’s creativity (Kingsbury, 1988). The relationship between the performer and how music is learned and presented is one part of the problem addressed in this essay.

1.02 Review of literature

A discussion of musical style or performance alone is not sufficient to explain the complex machinations and interactions between music learning and performance in a cross-cultural context. Stylistic detail grows out a more complex contextual environment, an environment called tradition. Tradition, as used here, is a collective of community-based attitudes, values and practices validated over time. Music, in this sense, is a medium that enhances the human experience by highlighting, broadening and educating the imagination in unique and powerful ways. Each worldview of music and learning is defined by standards

developed and maintained by its practitioners. Learning music in the Western tradition relies on parameters that include notation, a certain systematic ordering of how information is acquired. When studying a piece for performance, for example, the performer must know the scale of the piece. Then the difficult parts of the piece are dissected and practiced to insure that they are not problematic during a performance. The parts are then put together to produce a performance. A critical factor in all of this is the idea of talent. Talent is the criteria used to select those who are to become serious performers. However, talent is not a universal aesthetic and often not found in many non-western ways of thinking about music.

For many non-Western traditions, learning centers around visual and aural components as demonstrated in John Blackings' classic work *How Musical is Man? Blacking's study of music practices among the Venda*, a South African culture, makes a powerful case that the Western idea of talent is "diametrically opposed to the Venda idea that all normal human beings are capable of musical performance" (Blacking, 1973, p. 34). For the Venda, musical "accuracy is always expected and sentiment generally assumed" (Blacking, 1973, p. 37). Blackings findings are not singular. Others have made similar observations among other non-Western traditions such as Flathead Indians in the United States (Merriam, 1967) and Feld's observation of similar habits among the Suya in Brazil (Feld, 1984).

Learning in settings of this nature involves a different set of parameters than those of the Western tradition. In these settings, learning is achieved through interpretation as opposed to direct translation such as in reading a sequential prescription of activities that once completed, results a desired goal. In the case of the latter, the content becomes the primary object of study. This can be problematic in the former or a non-western setting. John Miller Chernoff's description of his experiences in *African Rhythms and Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* is a case in point. His example helps to make the distinction between interpretation and direct translation; the struggles between content-only learning and content/context learning and the problems one faces when attempting to meld personal experience with a music tradition whose aesthetic principles are grounded in relationships between musicians, dancers, and spectators (Miller Chernoff, 1979). Miller introduces his study by posing the question "How can we bring something of a different order into our world of understanding and at the same time recognize and appreciate it on its own terms?" (Miller Chernoff, 1979, p. 3). The question is important because Miller is aware that in the process of cultural transition or cross interpretation there is a real possibility that many dimensions will be lost. He "understands that the main problem of participant observation is the violence it does to the love which has motivated and sustained it" (Miller Chernoff, 1979, p. 11). And yet Miller is particularly astute when discussing his own experiences in the learning process. But if there is a failing, it might well be his assumption, based on common practice in his home culture, that if he commits an error he will be criticized by his teacher, an assumption that quite probably is flawed in his Ghanaian experience. However his study is important in that it points out the difficulty one faces when learning cultural practices that are different from one's own.

Differences in music learning and cultural context are not confined to the Western and Non-Western paradigms. These differences are also very much a part of the American music scene as well. Nowhere have musical traditions come into more direct confrontation than in 1983 when Wynton Marsalis won two Grammy Awards, one for Best Jazz Instrumental Performance of "Think of One" and one for Best Classical for his recording of Hayden and Hummel's trumpet concertos. While jazz is now recognized as a vibrant and substantial contributor to American culture, this has not always been the case. According to Levine, until the turn of the twentieth century, jazz and culture were not regarded as compatible or comparable (Source). As America began to formulate cultural structures in the beginning of the twentieth century, expressive cultures were labeled High, Low, Highbrow, Popular. Levine argues that although the terms lacked any "genuine precision" they were use anyway to define those artifacts that had little "aesthetic worth." Anything defined with the designation "Culture" was assumed to have high associated with it (Levine, 1988, pp. 224-225). Here, then, is the crux of the Marsalis conundrum, he crossed boundaries in a way that had never been done before. Many said that he needed to make a

choice that he could not walk in two worlds. Ultimately, he did.

But Marsalis is an exception. Understanding the difficulties of traversing different musical worlds, aesthetics, values and learning styles continues to pose problems for understanding ourselves and others. The experiences described here are similar to the ones described by Miller-Chernoff but different in that they take place within the context of a unique closed-in guild that is part of a larger religious community.

The methodological approach, ethnography, used is one shared by anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and social scientists alike. A critical dimension is face-to-face observations and participation in performance. Stone describes ethnography as “fieldwork carried out on location among people who perform- wherever on the globe they may live, including local communities in close proximity to the everyday world” (Stone, 2008, p. 4).

The narratives and discussions locating the batá and its role in the liturgy of Afro-Cuban religious music are growing (Castellanos, 1994), (Cornelius, 1992.), (Vélez, 2000), (Amira, 1993), (Moliner Castañeda, 2004). However, very little research on batá drumming has been done from the perspective of musical performance. There are limits on this research technique, because one has to be an initiated member of the *aña* brotherhood in order to touch a drum, and in order to actually perform with an ensemble, one needs to learn the music and all that’s embedded in it I approached the project carrying the baggage of previous training that would, at some point, have to be reckoned and reconciled with, and assimilated into new frames.

Orlando “Puntilla” Rios (1947–2008) was a master percussionist in the diverse styles of Cuban music in Cuba and the United States. Before settling in New York, he taught percussion at the National School of the Arts in Cuba between 1971 and 1978, and performed in some of the best-known hotels in Havana, including the Tropicana and the Havana Riviera. Puntilla came to the United States in 1980 and was one of the earliest performers on the sacred batá in this country. He became a pillar in the New York religious community and conducted hundreds of ceremonies and religious feasts every year in New York, New Jersey, Florida, Texas, Puerto Rico, and Germany. He guided my learning, and it is that process that I wish to document here, using frame analysis.

Frame analysis dates back to the work of Gregory Bateson (Bateson, 1972) and Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1974), and more recently to the work of George Lakoff. As a cognitive scientist and linguist, Lakoff draws together what is known about the mind from the disciplines of anthropology, philosophy, and computer science. Frame analysis looks for detailed answers to questions such as: What is reason? How do we make sense of our experiences? What is a conceptual system and how is it organized? In order for me as an observer and participant to comprehend particular behaviors and actions, to learn something entirely new, I need to identify or construct a frame or context for the events and processes I observe and in which I participate. As I learned batá drumming, weaving history, authenticity, authority and process together helped to construct this narrative.

It was important to Puntilla that I understand the protocols for handling the drum before I was accepted into *Omo-aña*, a community of select players, the only ones allowed to play the sacred batá. One must receive approval from the *Orishas*³ before beginning the journey that leads to initiation and the training in the complex rhythms, language, and understanding of the procedures and processes of handling the batá. Then and only then is one allowed to know the secrets of *Aña*, a sacred object that resides in the

³ The *Orisha* are religious deities who control the affairs of the practitioner and provide guidance through divination. They are one manifestation of the Supreme Being *Oludumare* in the Yoruba religious cosmos. The Cuban iteration of this system includes in its pantheon the *Orishas* *Shango*, *Olokun*, *Ifá*, *Yemojá*, *Osun*, *Obátála*, *Oshun*, *Ògún*, *Ochosi*, *Okó*, *Soponna*, *Oyá* and *Esu/Legba*.

iyá, the largest of the three drums.⁴ Aña is the spiritual force and the mystery that gives the drum its spiritual voice and makes it sacred.

The batá ensemble consists of three hourglass-shaped drums. The iyá is the largest, the itótele is mid-sized, and the okónkolo is the smallest. Each drum has two heads covered with a membrane, one side larger than the other: the smaller side is called the chacha, and the larger, the enu. The larger drumhead of the iyá is frequently wrapped with a belt or strap with bells attached, called a chaworó. It is the combined sounds of the bells and the drumheads that calls the Orishas down to the ceremony and provokes them to possess and or “mount” trance initiates. The final feature of the iyá is the fardela, a paste-like resinous circle that is attached to the larger head. It is made from tree resin, blood, honey, wax, vegetable or fish oil, soap, and other substances that are not made public. The fardela dampens the drum’s ring and modulates its sound to the proper pitch and tonal color. The itótele, or middle drum, plays a variety of patterns that follow the iyá. The name itótele, loosely translated from Yoruba, means “the one who follows.” The term okónkolo is derived from the Yoruba word konko, meaning “small.” Omelé, another name by which this drum is called, may mean “child” or “youth”; this refers to the drum’s comparatively small size. The okónkolo generally plays one repeated pattern that may vary slightly from one section to another.

The seating arrangement for the drums is also ordered. The largest drum, the iyá, is placed in the center of the group. It leads and guides the ensemble through the sacred language of the Orishas. The itótele, next in size, is placed at the iyá player’s left hand; it responds to and engages the iyá in rhythmic conversations in addition to interacting with the okónkolo. The okónkolo, the smallest drum, is placed to the right of the iyá player and functions as the timekeeper while remaining alert to the calls and changes initiated by the iyá. An Omo-aña learns the rhythms that are used to communicate with the Orishas, who are then asked to descend to the ceremony to speak with and through initiates, share in their joy, and dance as their rhythms are played. Each Orisha-associated rhythm is the key to the sacred language that influences the energy of the ceremonies.

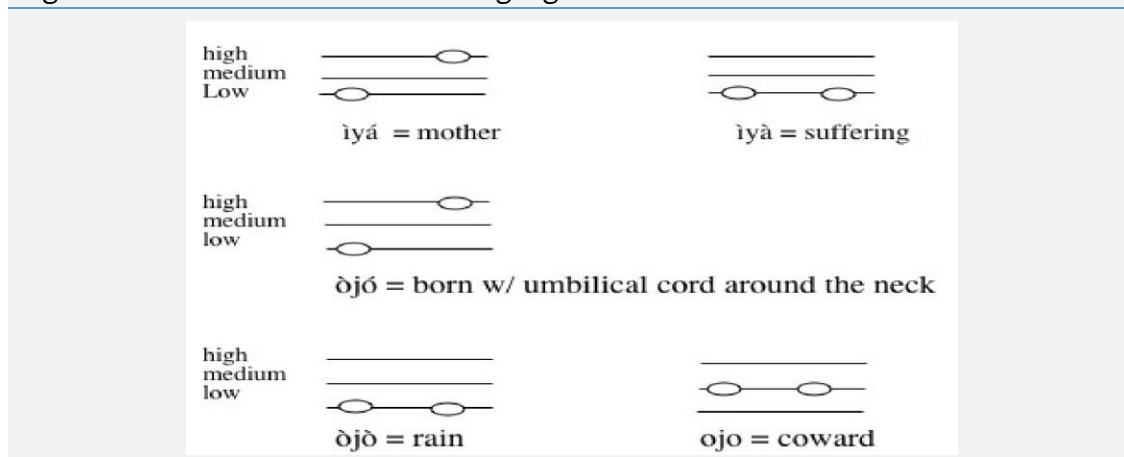
The term iyá means “mother” in the Yoruba language. As the lead drum, it plays very complex variations from an established set of traditional rhythmic patterns that incorporate the tonal nature of the Yoruba language, as illustrated in Figure 1.5 Although the Cuban version of the Yoruba language, Lucumí, separated from its African source as it adapted to the Spanish language, the iyá is still believed to speak the words of the Orishas, albeit in a modified tongue. The iyá player is able to make his drum “speak,” reproducing the inflections and sounds of Lucumí, through Aña, a sacred token placed inside every consecrated iyá to give it its voice.

The elekoto are three small drums that support the batá, serving both a symbolic and a practical function. Elekoto are consecrated and are always present at the presentation of bataleros (drummers) to the fundamento. The elekoto also receive food (blood of sacrificed animals), as the other drums do. Because they are consecrated, they can be used to substitute for batá drums in an emergency—for example, if the straps or head of a batá drum are damaged during the performance of a toque. The elekoto can replace any of the three batá drums. “If something happens to one of the drums,” Puntilla says, “then you go home and get the elekoto.”

⁴ The term batá is singular, but there are three drums.

⁵ Yoruba is a tonal language. It uses three tones that are indispensable to determining meaning.

Figure 1: Three tones of the Yoruba language



When I began this journey, Puntilla made it clear to me that before I could understand the batá, its use, functions, and protocols, I needed to understand its role in the religious cosmos of the practitioners. It is the primary instrument in the contemporary world that Oludumare recognizes as being sanctioned to call his emissaries, the Orishas, to interact with humankind. The Orishas rule every force of nature and every aspect of human life. And yet they are approachable and can be counted on to come to the aid of their followers, guiding them to better lives both materially and spiritually.

To put this communication into effect, human beings use rituals, prayers, divination, and ebó,⁶ or sacrificial offerings; they also use songs, rhythms, and trance possessions. Nothing can be communicated without the batá.

The batá invokes specific rhythms that invite specific Orishas to descend to a ceremony and induce trance possession by “mounting” a participant. It is important that all of this happen correctly; that is, the chants and rhythms played to Orishas inviting them to descend must be unerring in their precision. So it becomes extremely important for the Omo-aña to know how to execute the rhythmically interactive patterns for each Orisha and when exactly to invoke them. I would be able to do that only after developing and demonstrating a performing fluency, rich in intimate detail and firmly rooted in my long-term memory. The learning process for me would begin with the clave.

2.0 The process

A prominent Oriate⁷ in the Bronx known by his ocha name of Oshunguerre introduced me to Puntilla during a bembé or guemilere⁸ celebrating Oshunguerre’s Orisha’s anniversary. Our first meeting was

⁶ Animal sacrifice is just a small part of the much larger definition of ebó (sacrifice or offering). There are many categories of ebó. There are offerings such as addimú, which can include candles, fruits, candy, or any number of items, or actions that may be appreciated by the Orishas. In divination, the Orishas may ask for a favorite fruit or dish, or they may call for the person to heed advice given. At times they may ask that a person give up drinking or other practices that are unwise for that individual. They may request a person to wear certain jewelry, receive initiations, or any number of other things. Or they may request an animal, usually a chicken or a dove, so the Orisha will come to that person’s aid. As a rule, animal sacrifice is called for only in major situations such as sickness or serious misfortune. Animals are also offered when a new priest is consecrated in service of her or his Orisha during the birthing process of initiation. In every birth there is blood.

⁷ This term refers to expert priests who preside over the major rites in the religion.

⁸ A guemilere is a party for the Orishas. During a guemilere The Orishas are praised, saluted and entreated to join the party through mounting one of the priests (esses) in attendance. This is done through a confluence of the song, rhythm, and movement, all calling to the Orishas in such a way that the Orishas will recognize themselves in the lyrics, rhythms and dances as they have been performed for them for perhaps thousands of years.

Rhythm plays an important if not indispensable role in the religion. Rhythmic patterns are actually prayers to the deities, with each Orisha having its own rhythms associated with him or her. Drummers practice these patterns assiduously for years in order to master

brief and to the point. Puntilla was cordial and direct; he handed me his business card and told me to call him and walked away. Our next meeting, a month later, at his home, was more eventful.

When I entered the front room, what I saw could only be described as a functional altar. On the left side of the room facing the couch were two complete sets of consecrated batá and the elekoto hanging from the wall. To the right were a series of soperas or tureens, where the Orishas are housed. Collectively, the drums and the soperas represented Puntilla's initiation into three of the major components of Afro-Cuban traditional religion—Santería, Palo Monte, and Abakua. After a warm welcome and a very potent cup of Cuban coffee, Puntilla began to explain things to me. To become a member of this select group requires several transitional steps in initiation and later, in performing. Members follow a strict regimen, including sexual abstinence the day before the drums are handled, and observe the code of ethics as to how the drums are moved from and returned to the home of the olubata. The code encompasses their personal behavior, and the color of clothing worn during a toque de santo, a four-part ceremony for the Orishas and the dead. As a person passes through each step of the initiation and the evolutionary process of the tradition, his or her knowledge deepens, and abilities and responsibilities grow accordingly. When Puntilla found out that I was interested in learning to play the sacred batá, he told me that before anything could be done, a request must be submitted to the Orisha Osain to determine if I could be accepted into the brotherhood. I was invited to his home on a specific date to find out, in the presence, of others, if I would be permitted to become "Omo-aña."

My divination followed the protocol of all initiates to the drum. That is, the Orishas were asked to indicate their willingness and the strength of that willingness to accept a new member to the brotherhood by granting permission for the olubata, the keeper of the drum, to conduct the initiation. Puntilla followed the procedure precisely. As the olubata, it is his obligation to secure the needed permission. After permission was received, we proceeded to the next step in the process, in which I was given specific instructions, including the exact dollar amount required to purchase the materials needed to perform the ritual, the kind of plants I would need to get, along with specific herbs and animals necessary to complete the process. Finally, we needed permission from Osain, who is, by many accounts, a very mysterious Orisha. He came into being after the great creation and arose from the earth around the time when green vegetation began to grow. His role is an extremely important one; if Osain does not present himself affirmatively, no Orishas can perform their magic, nor can their children be initiated. Therefore, getting his permission was paramount. Once it had been granted, I was ready to begin at the beginning; my initiation began on February 25, 2007, preparing me to be introduced to the brotherhood and the intricacies of the clave.

3.0 What is the clave?

The clave is both an instrument and a rhythmic figure. It is the foundation for just about every aspect of Afro-Cuban music, including instrument patterns, melodic phrases, and improvisation. Clave is the glue that holds everything else together, so when it begins, it never changes. It does not stop, and it never reverses itself. Fernando Ortiz referred to the clave as one of a number of Afro-Cuban rhythm cells that even when divided into two distinct parts, do not change (Levine, 1988, pp. 224-225). The clave cell is a pattern that consists of a two-measure unit or phrase that is held together by a half-note pulse on beats

their intricacies. This is important, since the drums are actually speaking or approximating the tonalities of the Yoruba language as they attempt to communicate with the Orishas. For this reason some rhythms are never played outside of a religious context, as it would be potentially offensive to the Orisha who owns that rhythm.

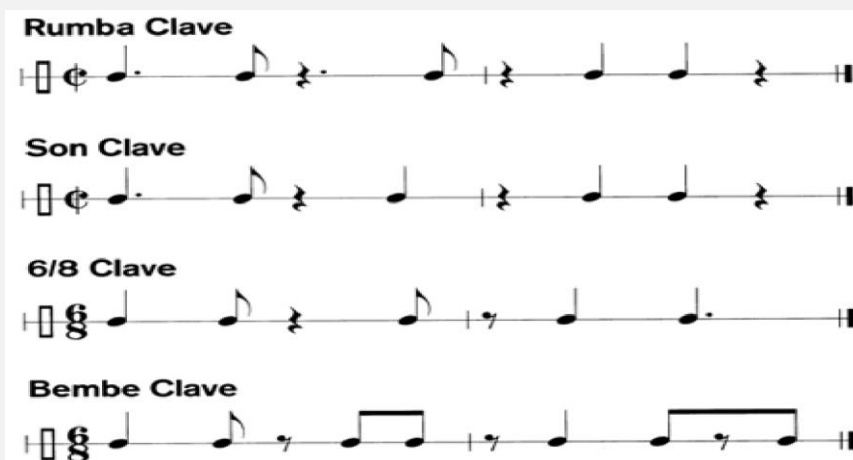
Dance also becomes prayer in the religious context of a guemilere. As with the rhythms played on the drums, each Orisha has its own dances, with Yemayá's dance emulating the motion of the waves, Ogún's chopping with his machete, Oshún's portraying her primping in front of her hand-held mirror and so on. Therefore these movements become more danced prayers than what the Western European would refer to as dance.

Everything present at a guemilere whether it is song, dance, rhythm or colors used, becomes part of an intricate fabric of prayer saluting, praising, and calling to the Orishas and asking them to be present.

one and three. The pulse maintains the stability of the rhythm and helps tremendously, because many of the rhythmic parts played by other instruments are highly syncopated. When I was told that my initial role would be to clap the clave, I could not imagine it being that difficult; after all, I had received advanced degrees from some of the best schools in the country. The folly of that thinking would be quickly revealed.

There are four clave rhythms in Afro-Cuban music: two in duple meter, 4/4 or 2/2 and two in 6/8 meter (see Figure 2.). No matter the meter, the pulse and the clave are inseparable, a point I shall return to shortly. The two variations in duple are the son clave and the rumba clave, each having a parallel in 6/8 meter. Together, the four represent the principal versions of the clave. Both the son and the rumba are derived from 6/8 patterns.

Figure 2: Clave rhythms in Afro Cuban music



As my learning started to take shape, I realized that I needed to become acquainted with and grounded in the rudiments of the clave. In the process of preparing I also realized that I could not rely exclusively on my university training, but to concentrate instead on the methodology that Puntilla used. I needed to activate and link surface frames presented to me by Puntilla to the deep frames that were the foundation of my musical worldview. So I started thinking and developing aids to help me bridge the gap between the two. For example, I began to think about the clave in relationship to a steady pulse in both its 3+2 configuration and its 2+3 configuration (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: 3+2 Rumba Clave Configuration

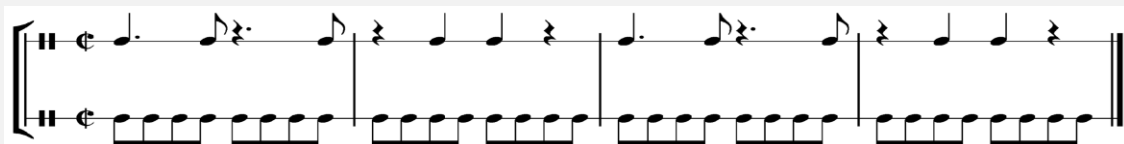
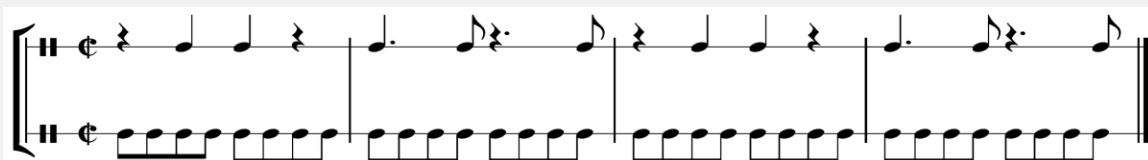


Figure 4: 2+3 Rumba clave configuration



And it was it was important that I also learn to distinguish between the rumba and the son clave. This is a distinction that is as meaningful as it is subtle and small.

Next, I wanted to explore these rhythmic patterns by combining patterns in 6 with patterns in cut time to develop my inner pulse and rhythmic feel. I begin with the rumba clave, because that is the pattern used at the toques in both its 3+2 and 2+3 iterations (see Figure 5.)

Figure 5. Rumba clave

The figure displays four systems of musical notation for the Rumba clave in 6/8 time. Each system consists of a piano staff (treble clef) and a bass staff (bass clef). The piano staff contains rhythmic patterns with eighth and quarter notes, often grouped into triplets. The bass staff contains a corresponding pattern, frequently using 'x' marks to denote specific rhythmic values. The notation is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, with repeat signs at the end of each system.

I practiced these routines, of course, outside of the context of the ceremony or party.⁹

4.0 Basic pulse

The son clave has three combinations. In the first combination the note of special importance is the bombo. When performed with Latin percussion instruments, this is the note the bass drum emphasizes. The second note of emphasis in the combinations is the ponche. This note is a common accent point and can also serve as a take-off point for phrases. The third combination is sometimes called the tumbáo. It functions very much like the ponche in the son, but it uses a lead-in from the “and” of two.

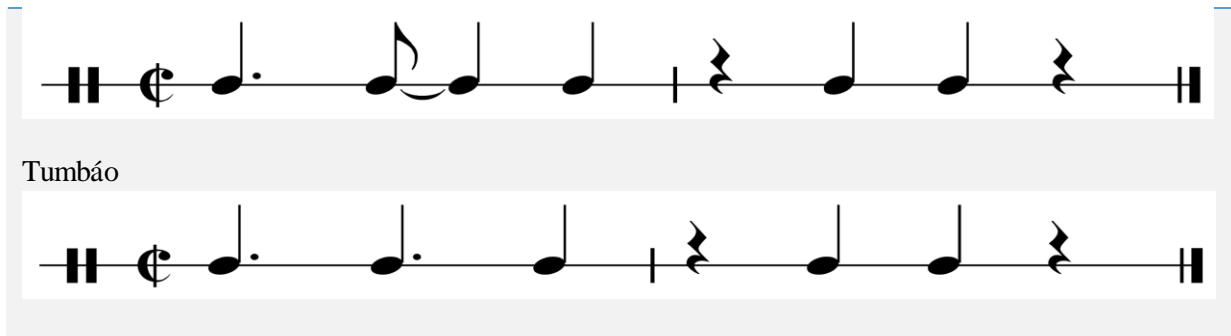
Figure 6: Clave combinations; Bombo, Ponche, Tumbáo

Bombo

The figure shows the musical notation for the Bombo clave combination on a single staff. It begins with a double bar line, followed by a common time signature (C). The notation consists of a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a dotted quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Ponche

⁹ The basic structure of ceremony consists of the *oru seco*, an instrumental section; the *oru cantando*, which includes the chants that are sung to each of the Orishas; and the *wemelere*, the last section, which expands on what has been done previously in hopes of inviting the Orisha to come down and mount or visit the participants.

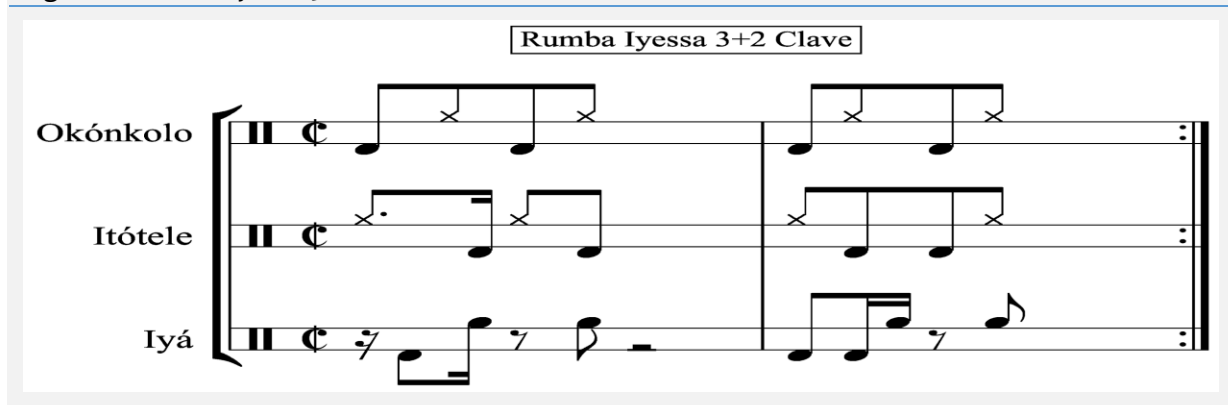


5.0 The rumba

The rumba de clave also has combinations, some of which are similar to the son. In the first combination, the bombo is the note of importance. The bombo, it should be noted, is the same in both the son and the rumba clave. It, too, is played by the bass drum, sometimes on each of the two measures. The second combination (the ponche) uses the last note of the first bar for emphasis. This is the note that must be performed in its precise rhythmic place if the rhythm is to flow and swing. This is also the note that caused me to rethink my approach to the rhythm unit known as the clave. The last combination in the rumba functions in much the same way as the tumbáo in the son in that it lays the foundation for general phrasing.

And as I continue to practice and study these and other variations on the patterns, I am beginning to internalize their sounds as aural objects. Instead of imagining the musical scores representing the patterns, I am constructing a new way of perceiving the relationships between the beats. I am creating new rhythmic frames. That is the goal toward which I am striving in this process: to be able to master the clave, not only at a surface level where I have developed strategies for learning the concept outside of its contextual setting, but at a deeper level, in the setting of batá playing, with practitioners singing and dancing—all indispensable to the ceremony.

Figure 7: Rumba Iyessa 3+2 Clave



6.0 Results: What am I learning?

Ultimately these experiences are helping me to rethink how the brain and the body communicate, how music has the ability to go around and through all of our defenses, especially those dealing with learning and self-justified rationality; and most important, how hearing is a very refined sense of touch. Walter Murch, one of the greatest film editors of all time, tells us that the evolutionary record indicates that the oldest sense we have is either the sense of smell or the sense of touch. Touch is what amoebae and bacteria use to navigate in their worlds. Hearing, Murch posits, is a very refined sense of touch. Of all of the five senses, our ability to hear is the last to develop. And yet from the time that we grow to be about

four months in the womb, hearing is the first of our senses to get connected to the extrauterine world; we hear the sounds of the mother's heartbeat and body rhythms, and sounds from the external world. Framing my understanding of the sense of hearing helps me to understand my experiences with Puntilla. The key to his teaching and my learning is his focus on sound and hearing in an attempt to have me touch the spirit of the drum, music, and ceremony; he does this by provoking me to complete a circle of which he draws only a part based entirely on sound. The part I am required to complete includes touch: the placement of the hands is critical is critical to achieving the appropriate sound. In using my hands to recreate or respond to the sounds I hear, I complete the circle.

This process has not been easy. The majority of my past training as a musician had focused great attention on the sense of sight. I had become pretty adept at learning that is sight-based and that isolates and situates me, the observer, outside of the experience, at a distance from what I am seeing. Sound, by contrast, incorporates. Sound comes from every direction at once in this learning environment, making me the center of that auditory world. Because my previous musical training privileged sight rather than sound and touch, I experienced a learning dissonance in my interactions with Puntilla. Learning to learn through sound and touch involved creating a new frame, like that of musicians who learn to play an instrument entirely by ear. Stevie Wonder, who is blind, and Evelyn Glennie, who is deaf, are two good examples.

According to Lakoff, the frame we use to perceive the world represents a view that governs our perceptions and thoughts. Our thoughts and frames are physical, and once in place, they cannot be erased. The only thing we can do is to develop alternative frames by negotiation between surface frames and deep frames. Consider, for example, what happened at the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in May 1913. Everyone in attendance was expecting to hear a performance of music about springtime, but Stravinsky had something different in mind. His interpretation for this piece was about change, or to put a finer point on it, he recreated ritual murder. Just a few minutes into the piece, people began to riot. So, we ask ourselves, what could cause people to become so distressed at a musical performance that they would riot? What caused the iyá player during a toque to yell at me for what I thought was a minor error? And what caused me to question an important aspect of my musical competence?

The answer may well lie in some new speculative science that talks about groups of neurons in the part of the brain called the auditory cortex. These neurons help to decode new sounds, sounds that we have never heard before. Generally, they do a pretty good job in interpreting familiar sounds. But when they are bombarded with sounds that are relentlessly new, and fail to return to sounds that are familiar, they secrete excessive amounts of dopamine. Of course we know that dopamine, in general, is not a bad thing. It helps us to enjoy sex, drugs, chocolate, and other things that make us feel really good. But too much dopamine can be bad and in some cases may produce schizophrenia. And just maybe, when the iyá player heard my clapped clave, he went a little crazy, unable to find rhythms that his brain knew and understood. This may also explain what happened at the first performance of *The Rite of Spring*. Just one year later, the same piece was performed again to acclaim. Twenty-five years later, Mickey Mouse performed the same piece with Toscanini. What made this change in aural perception possible?

Any time we launch our ship of inquiry into the deep uncertain waters of exploration without the comfort of a harbor or anchor, it creates unease and uncertainty. Uncertainty, however, can also be a prescription for learning. Recent developments in the fields of neuroscience, cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology, and artificial intelligence are telling us a great deal about the mind and how it works. The following five points are derived from some of these studies (Kingsbury, 1988, pp. 87-88).

1. The use of frames is largely unconscious. That is, most of our thinking is structured before it makes itself known to us on a conscious level. When our thoughts are activated, the process is done at a neural level, initially.

2. Frames define common sense. Common sense, of course, is not an absolute; it varies from person to person according their experiences and worldview.
3. Repetition can embed frames in the brain, and is an effective tool in shaping worldviews.
4. Deep frames are the basis for our worldview. If incompatible views are presented to the brain, meaning becomes unstable. This is a condition that the brain does not allow; when one scenario is activated, all other incompatible frames are suppressed.
5. Existing deep frames do not change overnight. Because frames are hardwired, the only way to change them is to weaken existing neural connections and strengthen or weaken alternative connections. Activation links surface frames to deep frames.

Incorporating these points into my learning process, I see the need to change my strategies. I am now rethinking my absolute reliance on rational thinking as advanced by Immanuel Kant, who worked assiduously to develop the idea of pure reason, which he believed was the essential attribute of human beings. (Of course, in order for there to be a form of universal reason, all humans would need to reason the same way.) Puntilla and those who work with him have their own reason and methodology that is different from mine. And if I am to learn their drumming tradition, I need to connect the surface frame I acquire from them to the deep frames of my training.

The levels of awareness that I am exploring, discovering, experiencing in this project find considerable resonance in the work of Jeanne Ryer, who has identified seven stages one goes through in frame learning (Ortiz, 1993, 276):

1. *Denial* – You can't believe that everything that you have done in the past doesn't work.
2. *Wonder and Aha!* – Suddenly, everything you see is framing.
3. *Paralysis* – Now you experience the fear of framing, because you know that there are still bad frames in you.
4. *Assimilation* – Now you hunker down, read, and think, trying to get yourself unstuck.
5. *Awkwardness* – Your frame now has the head of a cat and the tail of a dog, but you keep trying.
6. *Integration* – You successfully reframe an idea and it works; you keep doing it and it gets better.
7. *Conversion* – Now you realize that you need to share your knowledge with your colleagues, or their frames will undermine yours.

As I read Ryer's stages and apply them to the process I am experiencing, I come to some rather interesting interpretations.

In stage one, denial, I approached the experience of playing clave with what I thought was an open and well-equipped mind. I hold degrees from some reputable institutions. But I was not fully prepared to accept the admonition of the iyá player, during my first attempt at clapping the clave with the ensemble, who yelled in the middle of the ceremony to what seemed like the world, "Get that wrong clave out of my ear!" I could not, as Ryer would say, believe it.

Then after listening to the many timba, a Cuban style salsa with a stronger Afro-Cuban influence rhythmically and lyrically that mixes modern music styles such as funk, pop and hiphop, and secular recorded examples given to me by this same player, and persisting in my attempt to move beyond my first stage of ignorance, I experienced stage two: wonder and aha! I could actually clap the clave, look at the dancers' feet, and concentrate on the okónkolo, the first drum I would be allowed to play—all three simultaneously. What a moment!

As I attended more ceremonies, I began to notice that other members of the group would vary the clave in what appeared to be more intricate and complex ways. When these variations were introduced, I panicked, because something was being presented that was different from what I knew. I did not want to return to the state of confusion that had marked the first of my experiences. Stage three, paralysis.

(After a while I learned that these patterns were assigned to the shekere.)

Stage four, assimilation, came sooner than I imagined. I did not experience the same frustrations that I had in the beginning. Now, when Puntilla would announce between chants that I should play the clave or okónkolo, I knew to concentrate with my ears and not my eyes. I began to tune into my role and to how what I was doing related to the larger whole. And in so doing, I began to understand the intricate dance of parts and the indispensable role each played to make a whole. Steps six and seven have yet to come.

In the end, or I should say in the new beginnings, I am coming to understand with greater clarity that research and non-familiar communications can be galvanized to create new strategies and messages. And in making these discoveries about myself, many of the things the research suggests about frame analysis were verified. For example: (1) people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world; (2) incoming information provides cues about where to file it mentally; (3) when we acquire new information it creates, overtime, a framework of expectation; (4) over time also, we develop habits of thought and expectations, and then we configure incoming information to conform to this frame. Mix in more modern music styles such as funk, pop and hip-hop.

Reframing is difficult. The most difficult part in the beginning is to see “thinking” in terms of frames. To paraphrase an old adage, “not everything is a nail, just because you have a hammer.” One needs, indeed, a tool chest with many different tools, and one must learn how to use them all. I am learning, though not always easily, that I can live in different worlds at the same time. I recognize that to be successful, I need to be able to shift the levels of my thinking quickly; find basic structures that apply to many different areas; approach things in terms of analogy or metaphor; and seek and find other analogies. This is not simply about enlarging my worldview, it’s about growth—creating new surface frames while keeping the old, and making new connections between them.

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