

# ‘For hire’: Marketing ceremonial Batá drumming on YouTube

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This paper examines the emergence of marketing practices on YouTube that promote ceremonial Cuban batá drumming. A primary consideration for analysis will focus on how authenticity of practice is conveyed to users through the technological affordances offered by YouTube. While a number of discourses surround the concept of what constitutes the authentic (e.g. Bruner, 1994; Keister, 2005; Lindholm, 2002; Taylor, 2014), in the case of ceremonial Cuban batá drumming authenticity is most often conveyed through adherence to the religious conventions and expectations that govern performance, which is in turn sanctioned through religious authority bestowed upon the batá drums and drummers through complex initiation rituals.

While there are many issues related to the practice of uploading ceremonial Cuban batá videos onto YouTube, for the purposes of this paper I am restricting the analysis to an exploration of how notions of authenticity are understood and enacted amongst offline communities, comparing these to the methods used to convey authenticity on YouTube videos. I will examine these issues by using one particular video as a case study. I begin with a brief description of *santería*, the religious tradition that supports batá drumming, the globalising trends evident in *santería* and batá drumming practice today, and an outline of accepted performance practices and standards.

## *The Globalisation of Santería & Ceremonial Cuban Batá Drumming*

Cuban batá drumming forms part of the ceremonial complex of the Afro-Cuban religion commonly called *santería*. Originating from the spiritual beliefs of Yoruban slaves brought to Cuba in large numbers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *santería* has developed into a distinctly Cuban practice that still retains a strong connection to its Yoruban origins. Batá drumming practice is still found amongst the Yoruba today. Though Cuban batá drumming has undergone a process of change in repertoire and ceremonial behaviour that marks it as distinctly Cuban, it maintains identifiable correlations with its Yoruban antecedent (Vincent, 2007).

Since the 1990’s, *santería* practice has been increasing in popularity, both in Cuba and abroad. While statistical information is difficult to obtain, information from existing literature and research participants in Cuba and abroad suggests that this growth is ongoing (Sandoval, 2008; Vega, 1995). Today countries outside of Cuba also have a significant number of practitioners. While this is concentrated mainly in the Americas, countries in Europe, Asia and Australia also have small communities of *santería* practitioners. Scholarly discourse about these communities is centred mainly on the United States, but some scholars in Latin America are also investigating this growth.<sup>1</sup> At present, there are very few investigations into the smaller communities based in Europe, Asia and Australia.<sup>2</sup>

Supporting the notion of a growing global presence is the emergence of videos on YouTube that capture ceremonial batá performance. These are videos of ceremonies being held in Cuba, Mexico, the United States, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Spain and Italy, as well as a number of other countries. Almost all uploaders are involved in the practice of ceremonial batá drumming and *santería* to some degree. While an in-depth analysis of who is uploading these videos is outside the scope of this paper, my research on YouTube shows that these uploaders are for the most part participants in the practices that they are filming.

The fact that these videos are being produced and uploaded onto YouTube appears to be an extension of the increasing and ‘exceptional’ popularity of videography that is being practiced by participants during *santería*

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Huet (2013) has examined the history of *santería* and its development in Mexico, while Saldívar (2011) has traced its origins in Lima, Perú.

<sup>2</sup> One exception to this is a paper examining some *santería* practitioners in Germany by Rossbach de Olmos (2009).

rituals (Beliso-De Jesus 2013: 706). The practice of uploading batá drumming ceremonies onto YouTube exemplifies the merging of a traditional practice with digital social media culture, which has resulted in the growth of online communities centred around *santería* practice and batá drumming. As Murphy has noted, '[*santería*] traditions have been shaped by the new media as much as the media has extended them' (Murphy 2008: 471). It is obvious that certain segments of this globalised community of *santería* practitioners have embraced these new forms of Internet-mediated technologies, within which YouTube features prominently.

### *Ceremonial Batá Drumming - Traditional Performance*

Ceremonial batá drumming is performed in ceremonies that are commonly called a *tambor*, or a 'drumming'. *Tambores* are an integral part of *santería* practice. Their performance is necessary for important initiation ceremonies, and is also mandated through divination as a form of offering to the spirits, or *orisha* – the spirits whose worship forms the basis of *santería* practice. Musical performance is primarily targeted at facilitating possession by the *orisha*. Batá used for *tambores* are often consecrated, and each batá contains the attributes of the *orisha* known as *aña*. Batá that contain *aña* are known as *batá fundamento*, and are considered sacred objects. Batá that do not contain *aña* are referred to as *batá aberikula*, and are only used in ceremonies when cost or location exclude the possibility of securing *batá fundamento* for performance (Moore and Sayre 2006: 124).

*Tambores* are communal events where practitioners engage in call-and-response song form led by a lead singer, known as an *akpon*. Three batá drummers accompany these songs with specific rhythms that correspond to the song choice made by the *akpon*. The only time the batá perform without sung accompaniment is at the beginning of the *tambor*, in a section known as the *oru seco*, or *oru igbodú*. In this section the drummers perform a series of discrete rhythms known as *toques* (sing. *toque*) that praise twenty-two of the most important *orisha*.

To perform on *batá fundamento*, drummers must undergo initiation. Exclusively for men, initiation involves a ceremony whereby the person receives the sanction of the *orisha*, as well as the religious community, to perform at *tambores*. This initiation is known in Spanish as '*juramento a aña*,' or the 'oath to *aña*,' and sworn drummers are known as *omo aña*, or 'children of *aña*'.

### *Marketing batá the YouTube Way*

Ceremonial batá drummers are paid professionals amongst the ranks of *santería* practitioners. They perform a religious musical service, and are compensated for their work through *derechos* (fees), paid to them by the practitioners who hire them to perform at a *tambor*. While some studies have examined how musicians have used YouTube to promote and market their music (Jung 2014; Mjos 2013: 77), those studies predominantly focus on non-religious popular music. The emergence of a ceremonial batá group marketing itself on YouTube is a unique development that creates alternative pathways for batá drummers to publicise their services outside of accepted norms. The following analysis will examine why this particular case study might be considered an appropriate advertisement for marketing purposes, and it will also highlight how the uploader has attempted to convey the necessary attributes that practitioners would be looking for when hiring a batá drumming group.

*Tambor De Fundamento en Mexico*<sup>3</sup> was uploaded onto the YouTube channel titled *obanikoso* on 5 September 2009. It has 3276 views, 4 likes, 3 comments, and is 2:31 minutes long.<sup>4</sup> The performance captures a small part of the *oru seco*, the section of a *tambor* where batá drummers perform unaccompanied. The footage of the *tambor* begins at 0:08 minutes with a long shot of all three batá players in the middle of a performance, filmed from the side of the drummers. The camera focus is on all three drummers, only allowing glimpses of the environment in which they are performing. The first drummer is foregrounded to the left side of the frame, the middle drummer is in the centre of the frame, and the third drummer is at the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnUdQ55YaiA> (accessed 28 February 2015).

<sup>4</sup> All data is current as of 28 February 2015.

top of the frame and slightly to the right. They are sitting on folding seats, dressed casually in jeans and t-shirts, with the batá resting on their lap. The batá are covered with decorative cloths known as *bantés* (sing. *banté*). They are all facing to the right of frame, and their facial expressions are neutral. At their feet is a layer of something green which is difficult to identify, upon which there appears to be brightly coloured balls and a number of other unidentifiable objects.

While the focus remains tight on the batá drummers, it is possible to make out some details of the environment around them. They appear to be in a relatively large space, with a floor that looks to be made of concrete. This space seems to be partitioned off by some kind of white material, possibly tarpaulin. Up to a dozen people can be seen in the background at the top of the frame, some sitting and some standing. It is difficult to make out their details.

This video only lasts for a little over two minutes. A complete *oru seco* performance may last anywhere from thirty minutes to one hour, depending on the time that the drummers choose to spend on each *toque* (Schweitzer 2003: 31). Owing to my inability to contact the uploader directly, it is difficult to ascertain exactly why they have chosen to upload this particular fragment. However, a closer inspection will reveal that there are performance qualities that make this video a good example of an *oru seco* performance, which can help us to understand why this part has been chosen to display their performance skills.

While the *oru seco* is made up of discrete *toques* that are dedicated to individual *orisha*, in performance these *toques* are often performed without pause as one *toque* moves on to the next. The first *toque* that we see being performed is known as *Taní Taní Chó Bí*. The video does not capture the beginning of this rhythm, but the straight cut into the performance captures the rhythm after it has started. At 0:28 minutes the middle drummer plays a call to signal the change into a rhythm called *Oyokotá*. This requires a decrease in tempo. While the batá drummers are playing *Taní Taní Chó Bí* with a quarter note speed of 180bpm, the change into *Oyokotá* requires a tempo of approximately 140bpm. This dramatic reduction in tempo is performed smoothly. The middle drum makes the call, and the other batá drummers transition smoothly into the new *toque*. This ability is again demonstrated at 0:50 minutes and at 1:08 minutes, where they perform transitions into new *toques*. This ability to perform smooth transitions is part of the expectations that participants in *tambores* have of batá drummers. The ability to perform these transitions not only enhances the musical elements of the *tambor*, but also serves a spiritual function. As Moore and Sayre explain:

*Good batá playing involves making seamless, smooth transitions between rhythms, which in turn facilitate transformations of consciousness in those gathered at the event. In effect, musical transformations accompany and support spiritual transformations.*  
(Moore & Sayre 2006: 123)

It should be noted that this excerpt captures *toques* that are not considered particularly difficult to perform for an experienced group. Other *toques*, such as *Didilero*, *Meta for Chango*, or *Alaro*, are much more difficult to perform. What this video highlights is a controlled and conservative performance, which emphasizes that they know ‘how to get the job done,’ and that they are able to create the necessary spiritual atmosphere that will lead to a successful *toque* performance.

The aesthetics of the video itself are decidedly ‘amateur’ in quality. The camera is handheld, and although it remains relatively steady, there is some motion discernible. The picture is not high definition, and appears slightly grainy, but the main image of the batá drummers is clear. It is difficult to discern small objects in the frame. Similarly the sound is relatively clean, but there are traces of distortion. I cannot determine what type of camera the video was filmed with, but it appears to be a non-professional camera, quite likely a small handheld device, or possibly a mobile phone.

Unlike the majority of *tambor* videos on YouTube, this video does display some limited post-production techniques. At 0:01 minutes the video opens with a purple screen, with white lettering quickly fading up onto it. Written in Spanish, these words clearly display the title of the YouTube upload (*Tambor de Fundamento en Mexico*), and also give the first name of each of the batá players besides which is written the specific batá drum they are playing. The last line, *Fragmentos de Oro Seco*, translates as a ‘fragment,’ or a part, of the *oru seco*.<sup>5</sup> The lettering fades quickly at the end before a straight cut to the batá performance. The performance ends at 2:22 minutes with another straight cut to the purple screen. White lettering scrolls upwards. The words *Saludos de Mexico* appear (*Greetings from Mexico*), followed by the YouTube name of the uploader (*Obanikoso*), and the word *Contrataciones* with an email address underneath it. *Contrataciones* can be translated as ‘To hire’.

That simple word ‘*Contrataciones*’ is what makes this video different from other videos featuring *oru seco* performance that can be viewed on YouTube. This video is offering the batá drumming services of this group for hire. The written description underneath the video reinforces this intent:

*TAMBOR DE FUNDAMENTO EN MEXICO, FRAGMENTOS DEL ORO SECO TAMBOR  
AÑA KOLA DE MI AMIGO OBARAMEYI SALUDOS DESDE MEXICO PARA  
CONTRATAIONES gmdelon@hotmail.com OBANIKOSO.*

*(BATÁ DRUMMING CEREMONY IN MEXICO, FRAGMENTS OF THE ORO SECO  
[THE] DRUM[S] OF MY FRIEND OBARAMEYI GREETINGS FROM MEXICO FOR  
HIRE gmdelon@hotmail.com OBANIKOSO)*

This video is explicitly attempting to advertise ceremonial batá drumming services. It does this by providing a video that displays the services, gives (incomplete) names of the service providers, contact details and a generalized location where the services are performed. While in theory YouTube can be viewed globally, there are indications that the batá drumming services on offer are aimed at a Mexican market. This is demonstrated by both the use of Spanish in the text, as well as the acknowledgement of the location of the performance ‘*en Mexico*’. While the main centre for *santería* practice in Mexico is Mexico City, this practice is spreading to other important urban centres in Mexico (Huet 2013: 172). The title suggests that the uploader is aware of this fact, and has decided to target the broader locale of Mexico, rather than localize the performance in only one city, e.g. ‘*Tambor de Fundamento en DF [Mexico City]*’.

### *Validating Performance Credentials*

A batá ensemble’s ability to procure employment opportunities relies on the circulation of ‘word-of-mouth’ recommendations that travel through social networks that are engaged in *santería* practice. These word-of-mouth networks are based on interpersonal communications that flow between practitioners, and help in establishing the reputation of any given batá ensemble. A ‘good’ reputation ensures that the batá ensemble will continue to find employment opportunities, while a ‘bad’ reputation will limit their ability to gain employment. While ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are relative categories, their application in practice is often more concerned with meeting the religious needs of *tambor* performance than with purely musical goals. In this sense, the ability of the drummers to create an atmosphere that is conducive to *orisha* possession is often more valuable than the ability to create a musically seamless performance, and will assist in establishing a ‘good’ reputation amongst the community.

Once relationships have been established between a batá ensemble and a particular group of practitioners, commonly known as a *familia de santo* (family of the saint), these relationships may become ongoing. It is common that a particular *familia de santo* will only use one batá ensemble for all *tambor* performances conducted for their religious requirements (p/c to author, 17 February 2015; Vélez 2000: 59). The agents involved in these transactions thus form a network of long-term social relations (Lippert & Spagnolo 2011:

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<sup>5</sup> While the uploader has chosen to spell the title ‘Oro Seco,’ I instead use the alternative spelling ‘*oru seco*,’ as this is the spelling I am most familiar with. There is no specific convention I know of, and I have seen both spellings used frequently in the literature.

202). These are maintained as long as the reputation of the batá ensemble continues to be deemed ‘good’ by the *familia de santo* that supports it.

With the advent of digital communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, *santería* has become a prominent online entity. This has resulted in the creation of new forms of community which challenge traditional notions of access, authority and hierarchy amongst *santería* practitioners (Murphy 2008: 479). This emergence also carries the potential to circumvent traditional methods used to hire batá ensembles.

This YouTube example is valuable in its ability to highlight how these changes may create both a disruption and extension of traditional methods of communication amongst practitioners. It is an attempt to broaden the potential customer base of this batá ensemble beyond established, accepted practices that require the circulation of reputation to be constrained to small groups of practitioners, and opens up the possibility for marketing to an expanded audience. YouTube offers the potential for a batá ensemble to create new networks of relationships that stand outside of word-of-mouth networks. I would argue that the affordances of a video-sharing website such as YouTube that combines video viewing with social networking capabilities, offers tools that make this appear an attractive option to those who have access.

### *Asserting Authenticity*

Using YouTube to offer batá services problematizes the means through which batá ensembles usually assert authenticity. Religious credentials are generally authenticated through personal knowledge of the drums and drummers, or through their reputations established amongst a broader community of practitioners. In Cuba, I have found that those outside of networks of personal knowledge are viewed cautiously, regardless of the reputation they might hold amongst another network of practitioners. In the case of this video, we have a batá ensemble that is actively seeking performance opportunities beyond the boundaries of personal communication, and they are using YouTube as a means by which to do this. One informant in Cuba was immediately skeptical about the religious credentials of the batá drums and drummers in this video, stating that you could not be sure of either from a video (p/c to author, 17 February, 2013). The implication for this assertion was that video could not give the same quality of assurances that come from personal knowledge accumulated amongst more intimate networks of religious practice. It is apparent that the uploader is aware of the possibility of these reactions, and has attempted to minimize concerns surrounding authenticity within the parameters afforded by YouTube. This is achieved through both the words and images displayed in the upload.

The uploader has sought to project authenticity through the deployment of key words and phrases that resonate with *santería* practitioners. Starting with the title *Tambor de Fundamento en Mexico* the uploader has already implied the religious validity of the batá. These drummers are performing at a *tambor de fundamento*, a ceremony that requires the presence of *batá fundamento* – batá that contain the attributes of the *orisha añá*. Examples of batá ceremonies exist on YouTube where *batá fundamento* are not being used. These videos often feature a title that includes the word commonly used for non-consecrated batá, *aberikula*, or a close variation (e.g. *aberikola* or *aberinkula*).<sup>6</sup> By placing ‘*Tambor de Fundamento*’ in the title, the uploader is ensuring that this will be the first thing that viewers will see, and shows the importance that the uploader places on ensuring that people do not mistake these drums as *aberikula*. This same title also appears at the opening of the video.

The other strategy that the uploader takes in order to convey the authenticity of these batá is through the use of ritual names. These are placed in the description text underneath the video panel, and also in the closing frame of the video. In the description, the phrase ‘TAMBOR AÑÁ KOLA DE MI AMIGO OBARAMEYI’ appears, which translates as, ‘[the] drums Añá Kola of my friend Obarameyi’. Here the uploader identifies the batá drums as being called *Añá Kola*. When *batá fundamento* are consecrated, the set of three batá as a whole receive a ritual name by which they are known. In this case, the uploader is stating that the name given to this set of batá is *Añá Kola*. The uploader also gives us the name of the *olúbatá* of this particular set

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<sup>6</sup> For examples, see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQ\\_w5XflunA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQ_w5XflunA); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEX6bqzqjyA> (accessed 28 February 2015).

of *fundamento batá*. The *olúbatá* is the person to which a consecrated batá set are entrusted. In this case, the uploader identifies his ‘friend Obarameyi’ as the *olúbatá* of these batá drums.

Another indicator that the uploader uses to imply religious authenticity is the use of ritual names to identify the people involved. This includes *Obarameyi*, and the name of the uploader, *Obanikoso*. Just as batá receive ritual names upon being consecrated, practitioners of *santería* also receive ritual names upon being initiated at certain levels of practice. But while the uploader has attempted to authenticate him/herself and the *olúbatá* as practitioners, there has been no attempt to authenticate the religious credentials of the batá drummers seen in the video.

While the texts that are inserted in the video production are important indicators of religious affiliations, the video itself offers other methods of verification. As identified in the opening credits and the description, this is a segment from the *oru seco*. During this performance, batá drummers will face an altar whilst performing, known in Spanish as a *trono*. In this video, the drummers are facing to the right of the frame. While a complete altar is not visible, at their feet is the bed of green and assorted objects discussed earlier. While it is difficult to make out these objects clearly, most of them appear to be different coloured balls. Most practitioners will be able to deduce from this that they are facing a *trono* dedicated to the *orisha* called *Elegúa*. While most *tronos* are designed using cloth, the *trono* of *Elegúa* is made using leafy tree branches. This *trono* is then customarily decorated with toys, as *Elegúa* is often represented as a child. Even though the *trono* is not visible, a practitioner watching this would immediately assume that the batá drummers are facing a *trono* to *Elegúa*.

Other indicators of an authentic *tambor* performance include the lit candle that is seen in front of the legs of the middle drummer, and the ritual cloths, *the bantés*, that are covering the batá drums. It is also evident that there are a number of people in attendance aside from the batá drummers. These people are quietly watching in the background, as is expected from participants during the *oru seco* performance. Later in the ceremony, they would presumably participate in the singing and dancing that characterize the rest of the ceremony.

Even though these visual clues may provide some form of evidence for the authenticity of the performance, their appearance in the video can be judged as more circumstantial rather than by design. They may help alleviate some doubts as to whether this group is performing at an authentic *tambor*, but the video itself is focused on providing potential customers with a musical snapshot of the performers, not on establishing their religious bona fides. The focus is entirely on the drummers, and the incidental images that I have been discussing appear to be included only because of their relationship to the framing of the drummers. It is the inclusion of the words that is most important here. These words have significant meaning to those involved in the practice of *santería*, and they would hold little meaning to those outside of this practice. In this way the video is targeted specifically at *santería* practitioners who might be looking to hire a batá group for a *tambor* performance.

### *YouTube - A new home for batá ceremony?*

I have examined a number of issues relating to authenticity and *tambor* performance, and have looked at how one YouTube video has attempted to project authenticity through the medium of YouTube. In this case, it has been done for the purposes of marketing, with the idea of expanding their client base beyond established markets. For this reason, the uploader has used the technological means afforded through YouTube to project the notion of good performance skills and authenticity of ceremonial practice.

But I remain sceptical that YouTube can offer an alternative to the more established methods for hiring a batá group. That a batá group may be hired solely on the basis of a video uploaded onto YouTube seems, at the moment anyway, highly unlikely. Even though the uploader has attempted to assure viewers that this performance is authentic, there still exists the problem that elements of the video and the accompanying text are impossible to objectively verify. While it would appear to be an authentic *tambor*, questions about the religious credibility of the drums and drummers cannot be wholly assuaged through the uploader’s own assurances. But, as in most advertisements, it may only be aimed at alerting potential customers to their presence. Further communication with the uploader may result in more detailed information, and it could also result in attendance at one of the ensemble’s performances. If this were the case, I can imagine that it

has the potential to effectively promote the ensemble's services to a wider audience. But I remain highly doubtful that any employment would result from this video alone.

Having been unable to contact the uploader, it is difficult to know if there has been any feedback regarding this video. The three comments attached to the YouTube upload only praise the quality of the performance, so there is not sufficient evidence available to judge its success as a marketing tool. But with the increased globalisation of *santería* practice, and the necessity for *tambor* performance associated with the practice, it is possible that YouTube, like the Internet in general, will become another means by which batá groups promote their services across a global marketplace. What effect this will have on the established means of hiring a batá ensemble remains to be seen.

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