



The African Roots of Cuban Music

By Boima Tucker



British sociologist Paul Gilroy suggested the history of culture in the Atlantic world is characterized by constant exchange. One of the most traceable elements of that exchange, is the musical connections between communities of African descent on either side of the ocean. These musical practices operate as sites of resistance, cultural retention, and social cohesion that allow us to understand some of the ways we all are formed by trans-continental processes.

During the dawn of recorded music in the early part of the 20th century, Cuba—one of many New World sites of African and indigenous resistance to European colonisation and enslavement—would become a hotbed for musical export in the emerging industrialized system of music distribution. Folk musical traditions from across the island would come together in Havana’s studios, and then get dispersed around the entire Atlantic world. In the early part of the 20th Century, Cuban musical styles like son, mambo and guaguanco followed migrants and sailors out across the Atlantic, hitting radio waves in the ports of landing, and spreading throughout the interior of the countries they landed in.

With its strong traces of West and Central African rhythms, this music would find legions of devoted followers on the African continent. Local artists would try their hand at recreating the sound, and start to mix elements of their own local traditions creating what we now know as Congolese rumba, soukous, mbalax, semba, kizomba, and highlife, etc. These styles, amongst many others on the continent, would go on to form the backbone of national identity in the post-independence period,

their propagation [supported with enthusiasm](#) by the leaders of the new nations. They are also the ancestors of many popular music sounds on the continent today.



Kiki on Conga. Image credit Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi.

While Cuba had technically been independent for at least a half century before sub-Saharan African nations, one could argue that Cubans found their true independence in conjunction with their peers on the continent. The Cuban Revolution in 1959 shook off the final shackles of American empire and posed a challenge to the hemispheric dominance of US imperial capitalism. In the Cold War propaganda machine, Cuba would go on to become the western hemisphere antithesis to everything its larger and more powerful neighbor to the north stood for.

After the Revolution, Cuban cultural production would become cut off from capitalist networks of trade, though the nation would retain some influence in the Caribbean and South America (despite US attempts to prevent it). In Africa, countries like Angola would strengthen their ties with Cuba during the Cold War, but the outsize cultural influence that Cuba held in the Atlantic world, pre-revolution, would leave a void that would quickly be filled by Jamaica, Brazil, and the Cuban and Puerto Rican diasporas in the US. Cuba itself would turn more inward, its cultural production burdened by the heavy weight of nostalgia and nation building—European, indigenous, and African roots fighting it out in a perennial dance on top of the ruins of the Spanish empire.



Youth of Chicharones. Image credit Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi.

The beauty in black Atlantic cultural formation is in the continual exchange of information that persists between peoples of African descent across language, national borders, and even time. This “counter-culture” of western modernity utilises and navigates systems that were designed to exploit and repress the communities from which it came. So naturally, on the back of western capitalism, African popular music influenced by Cuba would repeat the process initiated in the early 20th Century, finding receptive audiences back on the western side of the Atlantic Ocean. In places like Santo Domingo, Port au Prince, Cartagena and Baranquilla, the process of acculturation and hybridiation would repeat, and Africa would have its turn to make its mark on the popular musics of the Caribbean in the latter part of the century.

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It would take until more recently, in the wake of political and cultural revolutions driven by youth on the African continent, and a global revolution in communication technology for similar processes to happen in Cuba. And that’s where Puerto Rican brothers Eli and Khalil Jacobs-Fantauzzi’s latest documentary [Bakosó: Afrobeats in Cuba](#) picks up.

The opening scene in the film shows Havana-based DJ Jigüe tuning into a radio interview with an artist named Ozkaro to hear that “something” is happening 700 km away in his home province of Santiago. A new musical genre, *bakosó*, was developing, and local artists such as Ozkaro were blending Afro-Cuban folk and popular music with contemporary continental genres like afrobeats, afrohouse, and kuduro. There are huge parties with hundreds, maybe thousands of fans in a public square, new dance styles and crews, and the city’s existing set of rappers and reggaetoneros are enthusiastically taking to the genre.



DJ Jigüe. Image credit Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi.

Jigüe decides that he needs to go back home after being disconnected and see what is going on in Santiago. This personal journey home, to a place of roots, serves as a metaphor in the film itself, for bakosó's origin story, and for Cuban's engagement with African culture in general. This, along with other devices employed by the directors, such as the folkloric dance performance that bookends the film, create a form-defying, yet accessible introduction to Cuba's cultural landscape.

Once in Santiago, we travel with Jigüe to meet Ozkaro in his home studio where they discuss the difficulties in being an artist in Santiago: the lack of technology with which to produce and the challenge of being distant (or rather disconnected) from Havana where the largest media houses are. The absence of such hurdles is taken for granted in the global North. In the production of the current mainstream global pop sound, access to state of the art technology is a necessary prerequisite. Even with these limitations, Cubans have no problem accessing sounds from Africa. That's because contemporary African genres arrived in Cuba from a surprising source: [medical students](#) from Angola, Mozambique, Tanzania, South Africa, and across the continent.



Some bakosó producers offer explanations as to why they think the African students' music has been taken up with enthusiasm by the public in Santiago. Reasons dance around the idea of African retentions, sometimes slipping into essentialist tropes common across Latin America like, "Santiageras have a certain sexuality." But, it's Ozkaro who provides one of the most profound insights when he explains the importance of the clave rhythm to the Cuban public. His insight is interesting because it is an electronically programmed clave that has become the most pronounced element across many African popular music genres, and was one of the main rhythms that African audiences had originally connected with when Cuban music reached their shores.

The film moves on from there to explore more of the African retentions embedded in Santiagero culture, and explains the conditions that birthed a strong African consciousness in this part of the island. In a scene where the group Conexión Africa is recording a song called "Africa" with an Angolan football club's banner on the wall of the booth, one can tangibly feel such African consciousness manifesting.



Bakosó party. Image credit Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi.

While this celebration of Africa in Cuba is inspirational, the film is a bit overburdened by the weight given to the personal allegory of a return to African roots (and subsequent journey out to share them with the world). Beyond just a connection to roots, it must be understood that the birth of this new musical genre was assisted by Cuba's state foreign policy of building global South solidarity, and aiding the African liberation movements. The film lightly touches on this. For example, Jigüe mentions the history of Cuban military support for Angola, and how this action is thought upon fondly by many of the Angolan students who arrive to Cuba. The film, however, would have benefited from more of this political context to balance out Jigüe's romanticism.

One section, if expanded on, would have gone a long way to rectify this issue, and that was the story of how a nationwide [Africa Day](#) celebration came to be in Cuba. Nayda Gordon, the founder of a youth African dance troupe, Sangre Nueva, explains how years ago African students would only practice their cultures with each other in parties and celebrations behind the closed doors of the medical schools. The cultures of these students piqued her interest, so she reached out to a medical student named Demba and together they organized to form the troupe. A former African medical student, Dr. Ibrahim Keita, mentions Demba and a committee that was formed ten years ago with the aim of integrating African students more with the local community. Keita alludes to the fact that this committee helped bring about the Africa Day festivities and claims, "if Kuduro is being accepted by Cuban youth today, it's because that was our intention."



Santiago, Cuba. Image credit Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi.

Gordon's personal motivation to connect with strangers is fascinating. It would be interesting to contextualize her initiative in relation to Cuban social norms and find out why it was important for her to connect Cuban youth with African culture. Also, the modes available for building programs of integration through grassroots solidarity in Cuba are unfamiliar to me, and in the film this section passes very quickly. It left me wondering: What was the committee? Who all was involved? And, how did they managed to gain state support? An international audience especially would have benefited from further exploration of these questions.

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Jigüe mentions over and over that this or that could happen "only in Santiago." This perhaps works best in a local context amidst a [continued struggle with racial inequality on the island](#), but not so much outside of Cuba. Because, rather than exceptional, the formation of a genre like bakosó, and the conditions that allowed it, is a process that I have personally seen repeated over and over across the Atlantic world (admittedly thanks to a little passport privilege and a fast internet connection). Kuduro, afrobeats, and afrohouse themselves are a result of such processes, and this is not the first time director Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi has been there for such moments. He previously documented the growth of hip hop in Cuba with his film *Inventos: Hip Hop Cubano* and the rise of hiplife in Ghana in *Homegrown: Hiplife in Ghana*.

What is exceptional about Santiago that makes it stand out amongst its hemispheric neighbors are

the social conditions that allowed this exchange to happen. In contrast to North America—where corporate streaming platforms and an “Africans! [They’re just like us](#)” narrative are propelling Afropop [into the mainstream](#)—in Cuba a state policy of global South solidarity, has merged with an African consciousness embedded amongst the people. This political formation is what opened pathways for integration between Cubans and their African immigrant neighbors. Paradoxically, at a time when much of us are hyper-connected, in the face of digital disconnection, Cubans were able to connect with Africa via Africans themselves. So, bakosó remains as a unique cultural space in a world where cultural difference seems to be melting away—it is wonderful, simply, because it is *still* a story of a specific place, and a sound for a specific people, at a specific moment in time.

Still, what may be most exciting for audiences in regards to both the film and the music itself is that they allow us to romanticize the potentials and possibilities they symbolize. Bakosó, as a gift to Cuba from the African nations that were touched by Cuba’s influence, being sent back to the island that helped define what it means to be African in the modern world. With beautiful cinematography, and an innovative take on the documentary genre, the Jacobs-Fantauzzi brothers have done a great job in documenting this exchange on another leg of its journey.

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