

Cajón Pa Los Muertos

By Nolan Warden

Introduction

Years ago, I made my first trip to Cuba to study traditional Afro-Cuban music. On my first day there, I wandered around the Vedado neighborhood of Havana, taking in the "forbidden land" and culture that is enjoyed enthusiastically but only vicariously by most North Americans. By a stroke of luck—though some might not call it just that—I happened upon a Regla de Ocha ceremony (sometimes known as Santería). The resonance of the batá drums had called to me from at least a block away, over the sounds of city bustle, and I was graciously invited inside by people milling about at the doorstep. Since one of my initial reasons for traveling to Cuba was to study lineages of batá drummers, I used the opportunity to inquire about which neighborhood the drummers were from, and with whom they had learned. This led to an invitation to visit the neighborhood of Pogolotti, a part of Marianao, beyond Havana's center and a comforting distance from the tourist traps.

It was there, in Pogolotti, where I met a group that goes by the name Grupo Cuero y Cajón. This group played a type of music and ceremony that, at the time, was almost completely unknown beyond Cuba, even among aficionados and scholars of Afro-Cuban music. My original study plans were soon dashed as I became increasingly amazed by this "new" music. In the end, I spent most of that trip to Cuba studying with Grupo Cuero y Cajón (GCyC), attending ceremonies that they were hired to perform on a daily basis in and beyond Marianao.

At the end of my first month in Cuba, I asked GCyC if I could record them in order to continue my studies at home. They agreed but asked if I would be willing to sell copies of the recording for them. I was happy to oblige and the modest but unique recording, made with a simple MiniDisc recorder and stereo microphone, has been for sale since the year 2001 and is now more widely available through a partnership with the record label earthcds.

This recording was the beginning of my studies—both as a drummer and scholar—of the ceremony often referred to as cajón pa' los muertos, cajón al muerto, cajón espiritual, or simply Cajón. I later returned to Cuba to do more in-depth research with the members of GCyC, studying the songs and rhythms that they use. My research with them resulted in a thesis for a Master of Arts degree in ethnomusicology, a 200-page work accompanied by a DVD and three CD's of performances by Grupo Cuero y Cajón. This work, which was later published as a book, was an attempt to document and explain the songs, drumming, rituals, and purpose of Cajón ceremonies. In the rest of this article, I'll briefly summarize this research, describing and putting into context this musical ritual that is just recently becoming known and understood outside of Cuba.

The Musicians and Their Instruments

The main members of GCyC are Pedro Pozo Pedroso (cajón player and musical director), Luciano Silverio Ochandarena (lead singer), and Silvano Pozo Pedroso (tumbadora player). These three members are usually joined by Dairon Rodriguez Perlez (a younger member who was originally an apprentice of the group) or Lekiam Aguilar Guerrero (who often fills in when Dairon cannot attend). Pedro, Luciano, and Silvano have been performing together for over fifteen years and have become well known in their neighborhood of Pogolotti and beyond. They perform ceremonies every day of the week, often carrying their instruments for an hour or more in the Havana heat to the house where they've been hired.

Of course, the name of the group and the ceremonies they perform point to the most important musical instrument being used: the cajón (a wooden box drum). The cajón is an instrument that has taken root in many parts of the Americas, especially Cuba and Peru. In fact, it is the Peruvian version that is familiar to most musicians,

having been added to Spanish flamenco and other music genres. While the origins of the cajón in Cuba and Peru might be historically intertwined, the instruments are now distinct in both construction and playing technique.

The use of the cajón as a musical instrument in Cuba began by the early 20th century, associated with impromptu musical gatherings that became known as rumbas. Because drums of Afro-Cuban religions were often banned in the early days of Cuba, the cajón was frequently used as a substitute in religious ceremonies to avoid persecution. Eventually, the tumbadora (a.k.a. conga drum) superceded the cajón in popularity for rumba drumming. Recently, though, the cajón has enjoyed a new wave of popularity, popularized by rumberos such as Pancho Quinto who use it to perform the style of rumba known as yambu (usually considered to be the oldest style of rumba). Over the past few decades, the cajón has become an essential instrument for honoring the ancestors in cajón pa' los muertos [cajón for the dead] ceremonies.

The Purpose of Cajón Ceremonies

As Luciano put it, Cajón ceremonies are to "romper y traer." That is to say they are to romper [break] bad luck or maleficent energy and to traer [to bring] good luck, good health, and positive outcomes to life's problems. To achieve this goal, participants in a Cajón ceremony use drumming and dancing with the intent of having an ancestral spirit "mount" (meaning, possess) at least one person present. It is quite common that these spirits (or "muertos") are representative of ethnicities considered to be historically knowledgeable about spiritual and herbal remedies. Most common of all are those known as Congos (Bantu or Congolese) and Gitanas (Gypsies). While different spirits will have different personalities and levels of spiritual knowledge, most of them are able to give advice to participants in the ceremony regarding spiritual matters and various remedies. In this way, participants seek the advice of the muertos in order to resolver (resolve) health problems and ameliorate suffering related to la lucha (the daily struggle of Cuban life).

The Rhythms and Songs of Cajón

The astonishing variety of songs used in Cajón ceremonies point to its myriad religious and musical influences. The most common songs are those that come from the religious practices of Espiritismo and Palo. The first of these, Espiritismo (Spiritism), is a religious practice that uses mediums and seances to commune with spirits of the dead who have "advanced" to higher levels of spiritual existence. This religious practice came to Cuba in the late 1800's via Spain and the writings of Alan Kardec. Palo also concerns itself primarily with spirits of the dead. It is an Afro-Cuban practice historically associated with slaves from regions of Central Africa. In addition to these practices, songs used in Cajón come from folk Catholicism, Regla de Ocha (a.k.a. Santería), makúta, tumba francesa, and other sources. New songs are also composed specifically for Cajón ceremonies, proving that it is becoming an autonomous religious practice, not merely a conglomeration of other practices.

While the songs are often thought to be the most important part of calling the spirits, the drumming is essential for opening up participants by encouraging them to dance. Many groups that perform Cajón ceremonies, especially those that perform irregularly, tend to limit themselves to using the rhythm guaguanco and sometimes palo. Grupo Cuero y Cajón, however, have been performing almost everyday for over a decade, allowing them ample time to sculpt a distinct musical approach. Pedro, the musical director of the group, prefers the rhythm yambu over guaguanco for its slower and "older" feel, more like a bolero, he says. Whether using yambu or guaguanco, though, it is interesting that these both originate in a secular setting (i.e., rumba). The fact that rumba rhythms are being appropriated for sacred events shows their importance to Afro-Cuban spirituality and is a testament to their perseverance over time.

In addition to rumba rhythms, GCyC make use of bembé, palo, lyesá, makúta, and batá drum rhythms such as ñongo. These



rhythms, when paired with appropriate songs, create a potent amalgam that GCyC use to control the energy of the ceremonies they perform. Unlike less proficient groups that play nothing but fast and non-stop guavano, GCyC are sought after for their deft musical sensibilities that allow participants to experience tides of momentum resulting in more successful events.

"Pure" Traditions and Transculturation

With such a great deal of religious and musical mixture in the construction of Cajón ceremonies, it's maybe not surprising that some people react overzealously to it, considering it an "impure" or misguided practice. In my own research on the practice, I've heard it demeaned variously as a practice of "confused Catholics" or Santeros who just "didn't learn things properly." Yet, such statements often seem to be a reflection of the observer's own confusion about what is taking place. In my interactions with participants in Cajón ceremonies and the musicians who perform them, there is never any doubt or internal confusion regarding their beliefs. Indeed, they are quite aware that they have appropriated various sacred and secular elements for a new configuration. GCyC sometimes refer to it as their "creacion religiosa musical" (musical religious creation).

Of course, to call Cajón impure or hybrid is to create a false sense that there even is such a thing as a pure culture or tradition. Cajón, for example, can only be considered "hybrid" when compared to its "roots" in Espiritismo, Palo, Catholicism, Regla de Ocha, and so on. Upon further investigation, though, each of those supposedly "pure" antecedents is found to be equally a result of cultural change or transculturation. Therefore, ceremonies and cultural practices such as Cajón are often spoken of in terms that question their authenticity, legitimacy, or purity despite the fact that such things are based on a subjective understanding of cultural history. In the end, Cajón is a practice that has developed from clear antecedents, each of which, in turn, developed from its own various antecedents. Cajón is as pure as anything that came before it.

Increased Popularity and Growth Beyond Cuba

Cajón ceremonies have emerged in Cuba over the past few decades and have gained popularity throughout that time. It seems to have grown especially popular during Cuba's economic crisis in the 1990's known as the "special period." The goals of Cajón—to alleviate suffering—were all the more poignant during that time. Cajón has also benefited in no small part from the fact that it is not a religion per se, but simply a religious practice. It has no requirement of any initiation and, in some sense, is open to people of any religion. Indeed, it can



easily fit within almost any of the religious worldviews found in Cuba.

In addition to its growing popularity in Cuba, Cajón ceremonies have begun to show up in certain parts of the United States, especially metropolitan areas with relatively large Cuban and Latino populations. On any given weekend, it would be possible to find a Cajón in New York, Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, among others. Though Cuban in origin, Cajón ceremonies in the U.S. are supported by communities of Latinos of many nationalities, African-Americans, and Euro-Americans. As a practice that honors the dead, it is needed now as much as—if not more than—ever before. ▼

¹Throughout this article and other writings, I use a capital 'C' (Cajón) to signify the ceremony in order to distinguish it from cajón (lower-case 'c'), the instrument.

²More information about this book can be found on my website: <http://www.nolanwarden.com/>

³The degree to which the Cuban and Peruvian styles of cajón are historically connected is still unknown. It is interesting to note, however, that both are said to have originated with workers from the shipping docks who would use wooden packing crates as instruments for impromptu jam sessions.

⁴Some songs newly composed for Cajón by Luciano and others are listed in my book *Afro-Cuban Traditional Music and Transculturation: The Emergence of Cajón pa' los Muertos* (VDM, 2007).

⁵Both of these reactionary statements were made by Santeros (Santería practitioners) who had converted to the religion later in life.



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