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## Socio-Semiotic of Music: African Drums in a Venezuelan Fiesta

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### Socio-Semiotic of Music: African Drums in a Venezuelan Fiesta\*

“En la sombra se oye sonar el tambor.  
¡Carracataplán! ¡Carracataplán! ¡Carracataplán!  
Es el negro aceite de la raza negra  
que empieza a chorrear.  
¡Carracataplán! ¡Carracataplán! ¡Carracataplán!”

(“Tamunangue” de Manuel Rodríguez Cárdenas<sup>1</sup>)

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### Abstract

The active presence of African drums in some expressions of Latin American music has contributed enormously to identify groups and cultural allegiances. In Venezuela, where the introduction of slavery began in XVI century, the arrival of black men from Africa was aimed to alleviate the burden of Indians in the new Spanish colonies, where the Indians had to carry out heavy work for which they were not prepared. Those black men carried with them their traditions and, consequently, they rebuilt in America their drums. One of the most well known celebrations in Venezuelan "negro" culture is San Benito, a festivity very well known in most regions of this country, where a black saint is worshipped during a day long ceremony, and where official Catholic religion rituals are confronted with sincretic popular religion rituals. San Benito is not only an annual celebration but it is also a school where young people are prepared in a well established hierarchy where every member has its name and responsibilities. In San Benito's festivity drums are almost the only instrument used by the players, a group usually composed by five to ten members. There are many kind of drums, and each of them are related to a function in the whole ensemble. In this research our main purpose is to look at drums not only as a music instrument but particularly as a central sign of a Venezuelan "negro" culture. In that sense, drums play a role by which African Venezuelan people difference themselves from traditional "criollo" culture, where drums play a less important role. According to our hypothesis, in San Benito's festivities African-Venezuelan drums have to be looked at in three main semiotic directions. First of all, drums are related to "nature" by their origin, second, drums are "bodies" by their volume, and third, drums are "collective voices" by their function among the community that plays it. Our methodology of research is based in observation-participation, and in interviews carried out among players and participants in this annual celebration.

### 1. Introduction

Drums are one of the most universal and ancient<sup>2</sup> musical instruments ever made by human beings. They are also

one of the most powerful instruments, and by their origin have been always linked to different expressions of art and culture, but also they have played an extraordinary role as an instrument in official ceremonies, in the communication of messages, as a way of calling attention in villages when, for instance, announcement from the authorities were going to be read, and also for giving orders in military formations. In African contexts membranophones were used perhaps more frequently than in any other part of the world, they are a main component of all traditional dances and festivities. But in this paper I do not intend to look at drums as musical instruments. Instead, I will look at them as social objects in a particular Venezuelan context of ritual and fiesta. I will try to look at drums as an expression of social and cultural values by themselves. For doing so, I have chosen three specific hierarchical contexts: slave trade history in the Caribbean and in Latin American colonies; African Venezuelan culture, and San Benito's fiesta. This characterization of context is conducive toward a semiotic analysis of values attached to drums, and their capability to express such values through the process of constitution of cultural allegiances. For collecting information and insights to my subject, I have conducted some interviews of people who actually play drums at San Benito's fiesta and also to researchers and cultural leaders that have dealt with these kinds of musical and ritual expressions. At the same time, I have also participated in the fiesta, which is actually held in Cabimas, second largest city in the state of Zulia, in the western part of Venezuela.

## 2. A history of resistance and survival

No less than ten million African slaves were brought by force to the Americas<sup>3</sup>, of which 95% went to Caribbean and Latin American colonies since King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, from Spain, "granted permission to the colonists to import black slaves"<sup>4</sup>; "In general the Africans who came to the Americas lived in the areas between modern Senegal and Angola. In addition, some slaves came from Mozambique and, to a lesser extent, Madagascar" (Palmer 1992:66)<sup>5</sup>.

They came to the Caribbean and Latin American colonies in the worst conditions human being can imagine. Under the extremely difficult conditions, with very scarce food, many of them died during the long days across the Atlantic ocean. But even at that moment, drums and dances played a fundamental role for the survival of hundreds of men: "The crews did not always depend on harsh discipline, shackles, and whips to control the slaves. The more humane captains permitted music and drumbeating and encouraged singing and dancing" (Palmer 1992:85). This practice had a therapeutic effect and allowed more men and women to survive, an objective that was of main concern for slave traders.

In Venezuela, even though slavery was not as numerous as it was in other south American countries<sup>6</sup>, slaves were mainly destined to work in farms, where owners gave them Christian or, in some cases, Greek names, and baptized them, teaching them official Catholic religion. "Everything conspired to break down the African culture (...) Once arrived on the island (of Saint Domingue), they were given new names..." (Hurbon 1993:21) This situation forced slaves to transfer some of their values and meanings to Catholic saints and festivities. Moreover, many of slaves working together on a farm or in small populations did not belong to the same region of African origin, to the same group, or even did not speak the same language. "From different origin: mandingas, congos, loangos; they were compelled to form groups with members of different origin, and then forced to speak spanish among themselves" (Sulbarán 1998:44). In that sense, slaves have no semiosphere, this "semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages", as Lotman argues (1990:123). So they developed a process of difficult syncretism between their own beliefs, costumes, and rituals, and those of the Catholic liturgy. This deep and absolutely new mestizaje (mestization, crossbreeding) created a rich blooming of new cultural expressions having as dominant traits a common and, contradictory, different African past, and a new set of social customs and religious beliefs. It would take hundreds of years for this "melting pot" to be cooked, and come up with new meanings, created by a strong need of identity. In this always terribly forced process of building new identities, with no continuity with what had been, up to then, their own historic culture, the struggle of slaves was, at the same time, a struggle of resistance and survival. According to Sulbarán, resistance took two different paths. One active, that took form in runaway slaves and the formation of maroon communities, and another passive, by which slaves tried to keep alive, in the middle of their new situation, some of their traditions, rituals, and festivities (Sulbarán 1998:44). This same struggle took place almost everywhere in the Caribbean and Latin American colonies. In Haiti, "Baptism introduced slaves to their new condition, but it also gave them an opening for the rituals of voodoo" (Hurbon 1995:33). As a process of resistance

and survival, slaves developed what Eco (1986) has called a “semiotic guerrilla warfare”: they went to mass, they preyed Catholic prairies, they even used Catholic symbols, like crosses and Virgin Mary stamps, but as soon as they went back to their barracks they returned to their ancient gods, to Mawu, from Dahomey, to Olorun, Ochun and the Orichas, of the Yorubas, to Nyankopon and Ajé, of the Achantis from Ghana. In a sense, this confrontation between two different cultures and practices compelled those slaves to become consciousness of their difference and, at the same time, of their own social sense. “The sense of social self at the levels of both individuality and collectivity are informed by implicit or explicit contrast. Individuals are said to define themselves by reference to a significant other” (Cohen 1985:115).

### 3. Rebuilding a new identity

Also, in Venezuelan farms, owners of slaves tolerated slave music and dancing because the land owners knew that they had to give the slaves an opportunity to relax and socialize in order to have a group of men best prepared for the heavy work that every day these men had to accomplish.

“Los amos no tardaron en darse cuenta de que, si no daban a los esclavos la posibilidad de bailar y de celebrar sus tradiciones, éstos morían rápidamente o trabajaban con menor eficiencia. (...) Así los bailes y las músicas profanas que los acompañaban pudieron implantarse en todos los lugares donde existió la esclavitud” (Bastide 1967:176)

Acosta Saignes has also explained that colonial authorities had to allow slaves the opportunity to enjoy their own way:

“Las autoridades coloniales permitieron desde el siglo XVI a los esclavos ciertos días de fiesta y aun que tomasen parte organizadamente, en rumbosos desfiles. Se trataba, no de complacer a los negros, sino de facilitarles la ilusión de cierto albedrío, cultivarles el sentimiento de que podían realizar sin trabas ciertas actividades propias. Por eso pudieron conservar los tambores, algunos bailes, canciones poco a poco modificadas hasta contener sólo reminiscencias, a través de vocablos africanos que perdieron su sentido, de otras tierras, de otros tiempos, de selvas libres, de antepasados felices” (Acosta Saignes 1978:146)

In XVII century, when most slaves had been Christianized, the royal town council, by resolution of May 10, 1619, ordered the brotherhood of negroes and mulattos to perform the dances they used to (in Acosta Saignes 1978:146).

It was in these farms and in communities created by cimarrones (maroons) [Z](#) where slaves rebuilt their drums using the new materials that the New World provided with no limit. The rebuilding of drums were not only an activity out of necessity, it was also a strategy of rebuilding, in a new context, an identity common to those who, by inconceivable ways, were put together in a new land, new costumes, and obligations. Drums were in that sense an instrument of resistance, an instrument of “semiotic dynamism” in a large “field of (semiotic) tension” (Lotman 1990:134), and thank to that condition drums facilitated the rebuilding of a new identity composed of old memories, new experiences, and a different landscape. In that sense, drums were indentity by themselves, because they had meanings attached to the old identity. As Fiske says “popular culture has to be, above all else, relevant to the immediate social situation of the people” (1989:25). So, in order to be relevant in their own right, within specific situation, this painful rebuilding of a new culture had to take fundamental components of what they were but also, by the force of their painful situation, of what they had to be in order to survive. Drums were placed in a position that facilitated enormously this hard transition. On he one hand, drums had all the necessary memories, in their music and rythm, in their sounds and melody. “Oral texts (from Africa) were preserved by the language of drums” (Martínez 1983:13). Africans took advantage of the fact that drums were easy to build since nature provided plenty of materials.

On the other hand, drums were slowly introduced in Catholic celebrations, where slaves were obliged to participate. This process explains why today some Catholic celebrations in Venezuela are pervaded with an African scent. They took saints like San Juan, in eastern Venezuela<sup>8</sup>, and San Benito, in western Venezuela, as representatives of some of their ancient gods and the values attached to them. “En los campos continuaron vivas las fiestas de S. Juan, de S. Benito y de otros santos a quienes veneraban los esclavos, no como miembros del santoral católico, sino como deidades capaces de dar agua o sol, descanso y esperanzas, inspiraciones y resistencia (...) El 24 de junio sonaban los tambores en su honor (de S. Juan) como si fuese una deidad africana” (Acosta Saignes 1978:148). Once again, drums played a role extremely important because they were easy to rebuild, and because once they were popular on this new social and physical landscape it was also easy to be introduced into religious celebrations in the New World.

#### 4. San Benito's fiesta

San Benito's fiesta is a Venezuelan well known ritual festivity, one of the main celebrations in Venezuelan “negro” culture, where a black saint, San Benito de Palermo, is worshipped during a day long ceremony, and where official Catholic religious rituals are confronted with syncretic popular religion rituals. Most frequent days of celebration are December 27 and January 19. This celebration, where hundreds and in some places thousands of people carry images of San Benito on the streets, is a ritual that goes between the limits of paganism and official catholic rules. Lots of alcohol is consumed and even San Benito receives, from time to time, a shower of rum and other strong drinks. Drums are played constantly by members of the *cofradías* or religious brotherhoods, whose members are known as *vasallos* (vassals), a name that describes their condition as servants of the saint. The organization of *cofradías* is very strict, and it is composed of thirty two officials<sup>10</sup> in charge of different duties, which includes members in charge of keeping order during the ritual celebration.

The group of drum players participating at San Benito's parade is known as *Chimbángueles*<sup>11</sup>, and their duty is to keep company, playing their drums, to the saint. When interviewed, they say that San Benito is a “negro that makes miracles, he likes fiesta, dance, drinking of rum, and he likes women”<sup>12</sup> (Salazar 1990:18). Sometimes just called “El Negro” (literally, “The Negro”), San Benito, according to some *vasallos*, “was a miraculous saint but he could not know his mother. She was wife of the King of Sicily, and she fell in love with a slave during her husband trip to Babilonia” (Salazar 1990:20). According to their stories, San Benito was so beautiful and handsome that many women fell in love with him, but he just wanted to serve the good Lord, so he asked him to make his skin black<sup>13</sup>. San Benito is that way the proper “negro” saint. For some researchers (Martínez 1983, Sulbarán 1998) San Benito is the representation of the African god Ajé. According to Pollak-Eltz (1977:679) Ajé is a divinity of the forest, and belongs to the celestial pantheon, or group of different deities, among the tribe of Fon, from Dahomey. According to Martínez (1983), Ajé is the son of a virgin who got pregnant by a king, and he was the spirit of blue waters, and it “is represented by a ñame<sup>14</sup> together with other fruits” (Sulbarán 1998:44). The substitution of Ajé by San Benito would have occurred some hundred and thirty years ago. Still today, in every celebration of San Benito's festivity, they are together in some verses sang by the dancers:

!Ajé! !Ajé! !Ajé! Benito, !Ajé!  
!Ajé! !Ajé! !Ajé! Benito, !Ajé!

In San Benito's ritual, as well as in San Juan's, “African slaves and their descendants celebrated, without knowing it, old solstice rituals”, rituals that “were transformed in America in signs of rebelliousness (Acosta Saignes 1978:148, my italics).

#### 5. Drums: objects and symbols

During the celebration of the saint, a group of seven men, sometimes more are in charge of playing drums. This group of player is composed exclusively of men, and also the members of the “Government of San Benito” are entirely composed only of men. This is important in order to understand the values and meanings of drums in this context.

Drums are not only physical things. They suffer the semiotic transformations that Deely has explained in his thermometer example: "...it is not only a thing become object but also an object become sign" (...) "It not only exists (thing), it not only stands to someone (object), it also stands to someone for something else (sign)" (Deely 1990:24). Drums are pieces of art very well appreciated, and the knowledge to build and play drums is transmitted through generations. For building drums they use wood from hollowed tree trunks and leather, mostly from cattle. So, if we look at drums as objects we will notice that they are a place of union between human knowledge and natural products. If we pay attention to the natural resources used in the building of drums we see that one of them comes from the animal world (leather), and the other comes from the vegetal world. Also, cords used to attach the membrane to the piece of wood come from the vegetable world. The vegetable world is associated with Ajé, the ancient African divinity of forests. So, semiotically speaking, San Benito's drums, as signs, are defined as related to "nature", as expressing the world of nature where Ajé had his domains. This characteristic is more relevant if we think that most members of the group of gods to which Ajé belongs are related to forces of nature. In some ways, drums are extensions of nature into the world of human, since they act like bridges communicating humans with their gods and, by their means, with their origin. If we think of people who have been violently uprooted from their land we can imagine that drums, as well as dance, and other forms of cultural expressions and instruments, are ways of rebuilding their old allegiances. For slaves uprooted from Africa, the need to keep alive their old semiotic system, it was extremely important to cultivate objects on which to "see" and "touch" their cultural existence. So, drums are not only a product of nature, a thing, becoming cultural instruments, signs, they are also a special kind of sign called symbols, symbols of the world they once had. I use here the word "symbol" in the common sense use according to which symbols are signs that represent "abstract" meanings. In some places drums even become more than instruments, more than symbols: The drum known in Haiti as *asòtò* "is treated almost as an idol, being made from a 'wood which has much blood'" (Hurbon 1995:109). In Bahia, Brazil, where a widely practiced ritual known as *candomblé*, based in the Yoruba religious system, women are forbidden to touch sacred drums (Pollak-Eltz 1977:110). This is more relevant if we think that the unique mission of the *chimbánguele* drums is to be used in San Benito's ritual. In a way, drums, with their continuous and monotonous *tam tam, tam tam*, act as reminders of old memories, not exactly the African ones, since today they have forgotten all nexus with the continent, but old memories coming from old memories, and in turn, coming from still older memories, memories that man cannot keep alive for so many years, because they have changed so much, but, again, the drums, in their own language, can still remember<sup>15</sup>. In fact, informants seem to perceive drums as part of nature since they describe them as part of their own body. And, in fact, this is the second semiotic definition of drums in San Benito's ritual: drums are bodies, and, in that sense, they are sex gendered. As bodies, bodies of nature, they become part of the human body which also has trunk, membranes, and they are too sex gendered. The *vasallos* and members of the government have classified drums according to their sex (gender?). So they have *tambores machos y tambores hembras* (macho drums and female drums). Macho drums are four: *el Tambor mayor, el Respuesta, el Cantante y el Segundo*, they differ in their size, except *el Cantante* and *el Segundo*, which are of the same size. Hembra drums are three: *la Primera Requinta, la Segunda Requinta y la Media Requinta*, and they are all identical, their difference comes from the rhythm they play (Salazar 1990). Macho drums are more important, and they lead during play time. They are all made of a trunk of the *balsa* tree, and as a membrane they use leather from sacrificed bulls.

Finally, drums are "collective voices" of expressions and, through their voices, drums have spoken for people who play them, not only as instruments in a ritual, but also as instruments of social identification and political power. Political movements among "negro" slaves were frequently accompanied by the *¡tam! ¡tam! ¡tam! ¡tam!* *Criollo* land owners and Catholic priests learned the political value of drums during "negro" revolts fighting for freedom. In XVII and XVIII centuries groups of negro slaves fought against slave owners, a fight that led local authorities to forbid drum beating, and even in 1888 Catholic priests asked for the prohibition of San Benito's festivities.

## 6. Conclusions

The encounter of different men, some times with even different languages, and different cultures, in a completely new territory, confronted with a powerful new culture whose aim was to make those men adopt a new religion, and a new culture, with specific rituals and symbols, imposed upon black men, violently uprooted, a terrible and difficult task of resistance and survival. They had to create and recreate, in a frantic mixing of new experiences, what would be their new culture, new rituals and beliefs. Their way of surviving, both physically and culturally, was to get inspiration on what was still in their memories, memories that they needed to materialize in order to give them physical support,



and among those memories, drums and music played a crucial role. Being easy to rebuild in America, drums gave slaves not only an instrument to be performed, but especially, a symbol to relate to, an object to represent their identity. Today, drums are semiotic objects that represent nature, by their material origin, bodies because by their volume they represent human parts, and also drums represent political and religious voices of African-Venezuelan culture. Drums are semiotic expressions of power because even today they hold together social allegiances, a sense of a social self aimed to show their social and cultural differences, since it is only through their differences that they can continue to construct, every day, their identity.

In December 27, 1998, while I was watching and taking pictures of the massive fiesta of San Benito in Cabimas<sup>16</sup>, I saw how frantically *vasallos* made police and National Guard members to stop the saint's procession for them to touch, repeatedly, the El Negro head, and for arousing him with lots of alcohol. Seeing this frenetic effort to touch his head, his foot or just his clothes, made me think, as an open hypothesis for further research, that maybe drums are just another way of the San Benito's being. The same frantic experience of touching the saint's body is the same frenetic action of the *chimbangueleros*. Maybe drums are just an extension of the saint's body, since, like him, drums are natural bodies, sex gendered like him, drinking like he himself does, having the unique voice of this people and the ancient African people who belived in Ajé. In this hypothetical way Ajé, the ancient African god, San Benito, the adopted Catholic saint, and drums are just the representation of actual transformations of the ancient African slaves, of their social self, of their always changing identity.

## Notas

- \* Publicado en S European Journal for Semiotic Studies. 2001. Vol. 13-1,2: 179-190
- <sup>1</sup> Manuel Rodríguez Cárdenas was a Venezuelan poet born in San Felipe, Yaracauy, in 1912. He was a pioneer in interpreting African-Venezuelan folklore through his poetry.
- <sup>2</sup> Drums already appear in Neolithic times, more than six thousands years before Christ.
- <sup>3</sup> Palmer (1992) tells about ten to twelve millions, Pollak-Eltz (1977) talk about ten to fifteen millions.
- <sup>4</sup> In 1455 Pope Nicolas V had given authorization to King Alphonse V to bring black slaves to Europe (Pollak-Eltz 1977:36).
- <sup>5</sup> In the United States the first twenty black men were brought as slaves to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. (Palmer 1992:66)
- <sup>6</sup> African slaves arrived to Venezuela in early XVI century. The first licence to import black slaves is dated in 1525; it allowed importation of about four hundred slaves to the Spanish colony, particularly to Margarita and Paria (Brito Figueroa 1985:169). In 1589 Maracaibo's Town Council empowered Rodrigo de Argüelles to receive two hundred and fifty slaves for farming and agricultural duties (Brito Figueroa 1985:171).
- <sup>7</sup> Brito Figueroa tells about a community of *cimarrones*, in Venezuelan forest during XVI century, where a slave, dressed as a Catholic priest, celebrated mass and baptized children.
- <sup>8</sup> "...during the past few decades white Venezuelans have participated in the celebration of major Afro-Venezuelan holidays, such as St. John the Baptist's day on June 24. On that day, thousands of people flock to the Barlovento region, especially the beaches of Higuerote, where they take part in day-long festivities. Teams of black drummers frenetically beat out Afro-Venezuelan rhythms on huge drums known as *tambores* which they have made out of hollowed tree trunks. On this holyday, and several others, whites readily join blacks and *pardos* in acclaiming part of their nation's African heritage" (Wright 1990:127)
- <sup>9</sup> Today Catholic Church in Cabimas has moved the January 1 parade of San Benito to January 6. In December 27 San Benito is celebrated in the old Cabimas neighborhood known as Ambrosio. In January 6, the fiesta takes place in another Cabimas neighborhood known as La Rosa.
- <sup>10</sup> In September 18, 1988, there was a meeting of *Cofradías de San Benito* in Bobures, state of Zulia, where members of numerous associations approved of a small handbook. This handbook was proposed by Juan de Dios Martínez and there he describes with great detail the duties of each member of a *cofradía* (Martínez 1990).
- <sup>11</sup> According to Martínez (1984), the word "*chimbánguele*" is originated from the word *Imbangala*, a place in Angola where the tribes Elok and Efik used to live. According to Acosta Saignes, the word "*chimbánguele*" appears in some documents of XVII century, and according to Salazar (1990) Aguirre Beltrán and Ortiz trace the word back to the region placed between Equatorial Africa and Angola. According to them the word had the following transformations: "*quimbangeles*", "*kimbangala*", "*quimbamba*", "*bangala*", "*imbangles*", and

“imbangala”. Bastide (in Salazar 1990:87) thinks the word comes from the drum “chimbanqueli”.

- [12](#) One of the most popular songs sang by the chimbangueleros says: “San Benito lo que quiere San Benito lo que quiere Que lo bailen las mujeres Que lo bailen las mujeres” (What San Benito wants is the women to dance with him).
- [13](#) According to some other stories, San Benito was a white, rich, son of a millionaire. He was merciful and one day he cured an atheist prince. This made the doctors to try to have him killed. The saint ran away and hid among indigenous people where he also cured many people. Once his enemies came to get him San Benito was painted in black so they could not recognize him. Finally, he kept the black color for ever (Piquet 1982:133)
- [14](#) Ñame seems to be a word of African origin, and it represents an edible tuber coming from a group of plants known as Dioscorea. As food, ñame is an equivalent of potato.
- [15](#) “Hay tonadas que no varían porque fueron compuestas allá en África y vinieron con los negros de nación; los criollos las aprenden y cantan las de éstos; son padres e hijos, no nos extrañemos. Lo singular es que jamás se los (sic) olvidan; vienen pequeñuelos, corren años y años, se ponen viejos, y luego, cuando sirven de guardieros, las entonan solitarios en su bohío lleno de ceniza y calentándose con la fogata que arde adelante, se acuerdan de su patria, aún próximos a descender al sepulcro”. (Suárez y Romero en Piquet 1982:113).
- [16](#) Cabimas, founded in 1724, is head of the district of the same name, and has a population of 221,329 in 604 square kilometers. Nine different schools of chimbángueles are actives in Cabimas (Olier 98)

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