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REBEL

*Yoruba religion and culture were spread throughout the Diaspora via the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The religion and its associated arts have taken new forms across the world. In Cuba, Yoruba religion is commonly known as **Santería**, and central to its spiritual practice are the bata drums.*

*On the 24th of May 2000, Amelia Pedroso, who was a Cuban priestess of Yemonja for 50 years, died of breast cancer in her home in Havana. Amelia was acquiring international fame both as an **akpon** (singer of sacred songs accompa-*

Priestess

Interviewer: **Amanda Vincent**

Translator: **Joy Woolfe**



Sacred

nied by bata drumming) and a bata player. Amelia's notoriety, in Cuba and internationally, was only partly due to her extraordinary musical talent and ritual knowledge, she also broke religious taboos by playing a drum traditionally reserved for males.

*The hour-glass Cuban bata, which are played in sets of three and are descendent from the Nigerian bata, survived through slavery only in Cuba, despite the fact that **Yoruba** traditions are equally strong in other parts of the Diaspora. However, the Cuban bata has diverged and evolved both musically and theologically. Like in Nigeria, the drums are considered to be sacred, and are used to*

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communicate with the Yoruba gods, orisa. These drums now sit at the heart of heated debates about religious protocol, cultural ownership and gender politics. Amelia Pedroso fearlessly challenged religious conventions, which exclude Cuban women from two of the primary religious power bases – divination and the sacred drumming. Amelia did both.

In Cuba, it is highly taboo for women to play the consecrated bata called *fundamento*. As a powerful and highly respected *Santeria* priestess, Amelia dedicated the last few years of her life to the questioning of the prohibition against women bata players. She agitated for the right of women to learn the sacred rhythms, through her actions and her educational work in Cuba and abroad.

R- On her visit to the UK in March 1999, I asked Amelia how she managed to learn the bata in an environment which is traditionally hostile towards female drummers.

Amelia: I have been singing for the bata for 31 years and the sound of the bata always called and moved me, and I thought, "oh, if only I could play!"

G.R.: And when you thought "if only I could play," did you feel that there were obstacles?

Amelia: Yes, there were many obstacles, principally that women don't play bata. Then I started to investigate about women and bata and realised that women can play *aberinkula* [unconsecrated bata] and that they play consecrated drums in Nigeria. I read this in a book while on tour in France, and there was a drawing of African women playing bata. African people have also told me that women can play there.

G.R.: So, in a sense, your permission came from outside Cuba.

Amelia: (Laughs). I decided to go ahead and study bata because I knew that women could study *aberinkula* because it's got nothing to do with religion. It's separate. It's like a percussion instrument, like any other drum, congas. So I gave myself the task to really, really listen and play bata.

G.R.: You taught yourself?

Amelia: Yes, through listening.

G.R.: How old were you when you started?

Amelia: I started five years ago.



Amelia Pedroso
Set of Bata drums (right).



G.R: Were there other women playing bata?

Amelia: Women, like my group, *Ibbu Okun*. There weren't women doing what we were doing, in the sense that we were doing everything, including the *oru seco* (a ceremonial series of toques (rhythms) for all of the *orisa*). There were no other women doing that in the way my group was doing it. And there is still no group which plays like us.

G.R: When you started performing, did people speak out against you?

Amelia: Up to this moment, no.

G.R: Have you heard rumors?

...

Amelia: If I haven't heard up till now, at this level that we are, already traveling and performing all over the world, and other women are expressing their desire to play, then I know nothing of it. If there are rumors, it wouldn't make any difference.

*However, rumors have been flying around since her death. There has been unsubstantiated gossip in New York claiming that Amelia played a set of *fundamento bata* on one occasion, fueling talk about the nature of her illness. Some say that her decline was a result of the poor treatment of the disease, due to the US blockade of pharmaceuticals to Cuba. Others whisper of the power of*

Ana.

The Cuban term Ana is derived from the Yoruba word Ayan, which is the spirit of the wood and deity of (all) drumming. In Nigeria, Ayan is passed down through male lineages and many drummers have an Ayan prefix to their name. In Cuba, Ana has evolved into Anya, which refers to both the spirit of bata and a secret medicine (or fundamento). The Ana is constructed by a babalawo [divining priest], an Osain (Osanyin) priest (herbalist) and an omo Ana [drumming initiate] and placed inside the drum. It is believed that this secret enables the drums to communicate directly with the orisa. Only drummers who have been initiated into the secret brotherhood of Ana are allowed to play the consecrated drums. Ana poses this primary theological problem for female drummers in Cuba. Some religious practitioners consider the medicine to be potentially harmful to women. However, there are many confusing and contradictory arguments against women playing of bata. Some say that since the drums are "owned" by the male orisa, Sango, only male energy can negotiate the drums. Others who recognize Ana as a female entity state: "a female cannot touch a female." Other contradictions abound. A woman may not touch a fundamento bata drum, or even stand too close to it, yet she is expected to salute the drum by bowing and touching her forehead on each drum.

Amelia was adamant that the existing arguments against women playing bata need review.

G.R.: Is Ana a male or female orisa?

Amelia: Ana is like any other orisa. It is a saint and it is an entity that is masculine.

G.R.: In Nigeria, the divinity is usually considered to be female and it appears that Ana has become male in Cuba.

Amelia: (Laughs). Everything is clear.

G.R.: Ayan in Nigeria is a patriarchal lineage, which comes through the father. It is rarely divined. But I have heard it is said that if a man has no sons, the daughter will be accepted into the house of Ayan.

Amelia: Yes! Yes! In the future, women will be able to play Ana...In that passage from Nigeria, which is the root, to Cuba, there has been this machismo.

G.R.: Likewise, in Nigeria, a woman can become a babalawo and is called an iyanifa. It seems to me that in the drumming, Ana is where all the power is, and at the

present women are forbidden from appropriating this power. What is the reason why women are prohibited from Ana?

Amelia: If in Nigeria, the root of the religion in Cuba, the root of the orisa, the root of everything, the principal base, if there, women can be initiated, why is it not so in Cuba? It must be for the simple reason that men have taken control of the whole power, and why would that be? It must be because of menstruation.

G.R.: What about menstruation?

Amelia: Menstruation debilitates Ana. It puts me in a weak position towards the saint. The problem is that when a woman is menstruating, she can't touch the drum or have any contact with Ana.

It is believed by some that menstruation is "a cleansing process, which transcends the need for women to cleanse themselves by playing bata, while an archetypal belief in West Africa and other parts of the world is that menstruation has polluting properties. Blood sacrifice is essential to Yoruba religion, and as the orisas 'eat' blood, direct contact with a deity is considered to be threatening to a woman's health. Yet no one seems able to offer a theological explanation on why women are still prohibited from playing after menopause.

Amelia: That's their way of keeping women away. It is a form of taboo to distance us. If there is no woman, there is nothing in the world. A woman gives everything.

The religious prohibition against women playing bata is in conflict with the government policy on the equality of women. Cuba's 1976 Constitution states that women have the same rights as men in economic, political and social spheres, and this coincided with the institutionalization of folkloric and religious music by Castro, thereby producing professionals in performance and education. As such, an environment where drummers were not allowed to refuse foreign, female students who went to Cuba to study bata emerged. The economic problems in the country was softened for many bataleros who were able to line their pockets with foreign currency brought in by women and men alike.

G.R.: When I was staying in Matanzas, I was staying with a woman who insisted on coming to my lessons. She said, "No one will teach me, but they will teach you because you have dollars."

Amelia: I have been saying this for years. I am always telling people. I am always speaking very clearly: for many years now in Cuba, the men still don't want their women to play drums, but foreigners arrive and they teach them. They are not a threat because they would eventually leave. The reason for all of these is that they think that if more and more women get together, and more and more women are playing, they will be the ones who are pushed aside. But it is logical for them to be fearful in their own narrow way, because women are much, much stronger on every level. A man is just a man, but nothing more.

G.R: Apart from the spiritual power which men are protecting and holding on to, can I suggest that there is also a commerce in bata because it is the most expensive drum to hire?

Amelia: Absolutely.

G.R: Do you think that women coming along is also a threat to this economic power?

Amelia: Absolutely.

G.R: However, we have a situation where women are excluded, but foreign men can be initiated into *Ana*. Is there any corruption?

Amelia: Yes, there is. It is no longer a question of love towards the religion, but financial wheeling and dealing.

G.R: How does that make you feel?

Amelia: You can imagine. I can't understand it. It shouldn't be like that. But it is business.

Amelia and her group, Ibbu Okun, were not only breaking with tradition by learning the sacred rhythms and performing in secular contexts, they were equally pushing frontiers by playing in ceremonies with the aberinkula bata, and managing to appropriate the necessary "secrets" through their own listening.

G.R: As a female group, do people see you as a novelty, a phenomenon, or do they judge you purely on your musical credit?

Amelia: All three. There are people who say: they are "a novelty, they're women, and they play well!" We are catalogued in all three ways.

G.R: Why does your group get asked to play in ceremo-

nies?

Amelia: People like our group. But it is usually more because we play in the *dia de medio*, which is the second day of an initiation. That's when we play the *oru seco*. They like the way we play, and because I have been singing for the *orisa* for so many years, they know that it will be done well.

G.R: Do the *orisa* possess devotees when you are playing?

Amelia: Yes.

G.R: So, in a sense, you have just as much power as male drummers with *Ana*?

Amelia: I don't know for sure, because I have not been taught, but I know that in certain moments when we do certain things, that is a key thing in bringing the *orisa* down. In the toques for Sango and Yemonja, I hear it and then play it.

G.R: I heard it said in Cuba that if someone becomes possessed and is speaking Spanish, then the person is faking it. If it's authentic, such person would speak *Lucumi* [dialect of Yoruba now only used in liturgical contexts].

Amelia: I don't agree. Sometimes people speak *Lucumi*, and sometimes they speak Spanish.

G.R: Do you think that many people feign possession?

Amelia: Yes.

G.R: Can you tell the difference?

Amelia: Yes.

G.R: Why don't they stop it?

Amelia: Because they're crazy.

To the more orthodox bataleros, it is the actual rhythms which are sacrosanct. They consider it to be a religious transgression if a woman learns and understands these rhythms. As part of the initiation process, Ana drummers take an oath not to teach women and may risk their livelihood within the religious community if they accept female students. There is an alleged "secret drum language" which some say can only be accessed by initiates of the Ana brotherhood.

G.R.: Do you know the secret drum language?

Amelia: I have not been taught; but I am not sure to what extent it is secret, in the sense that if you can hear, then you can play. I have done everything by hearing others play. But I don't think that it is secret, it's just that they don't teach it. On occasions, I have heard them speak and they say: "this *toque* means this." Not everyone knows these things, but quite a lot of drummers do. I know people who know it, and they would be able to play something, and the other one will reply with the drum. I communicate with the drum, but more with the song. There are moments when the song is very important for bringing the *orisa* down, but I think the drum alone can bring the *orisa*. This is done with the conversation of the drum. I have heard it done, and I have done it myself through hearing.

G.R.: Is it possible that everybody learns that way and actually there is no secret drum language?

Amelia: I believe that. It is as if having a secret is more important than the content of the secret. It's like saying "this box is green inside," and someone says "why is it green inside?" There should be a reason for things.

Yoruba religion has become highly politicized in Europe and the United States, where it is often argued that only people with African ancestry have the birthright to this spiritual practice. Amelia is outspoken in her disapproval of this view.

Amelia: That is totally out of order. I have always been a just person. *Olofi* [Lucumi for *Olorun* or God] created the world and the *orisa* for all people of all races. The religion has got nothing to do with helping to get a better house, a better job, and a new wife. It's just for devotion in the spiritual realm.

G.R.: Have you ever seen discrimination against white people within the religion in Cuba?

Amelia: No. There are almost more white people in the religion than blacks. I have white American god children who are about to do their initiation in Cuba. It's not that the whites want to rob the religion, and sometimes some of these people (whites) have more faith than some black people. The religion gives you so much when you're close to your *orisa*. It fills your life so much. These white people have experienced that, and that's why they're drawn to it.

While in the UK, Amelia met a Yoruba chief from Osogbo who promised to take her to Nigeria in late 2000. It was a dream which Amelia held dear and frequently spoke about

in the final months of her life. She was working on a book of Lucumi songs and planned to deepen and exchange her knowledge in Nigeria.

Amelia: I want to publish the songs, otherwise the religion is lost. Even in Africa, they say that the religion in Cuba still manages to keep ahead in some ways because a lot of things have been lost in Africa. I am worried that more will be lost, which is why I need to publish this book.

G.R.: Some Nigerians feel very angry when they hear that said.

Amelia: I am not the one who said this - it was a Nigerian man.

Amelia's death brings a great loss to the Santeria tradition. Her passing is particularly sad for the growing number of women who have been challenging the long-held taboo against female drummers. Amelia will be remembered for her beautiful voice, her phenomenal wealth of knowledge, and her warrior spirit which will undoubtedly pave the way for change in the 21st century. GR