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An Afrocentric Approach to Musical Performance in the Black South Atlantic: The Candombe Drumming in Uruguay

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Abstract

The *Candombe* drumming by people of African descent in Uruguay is a sound case in the Southern end of the so-called Black Atlantic. This paper analyzes style and interactive fluency in the body movements that generate sound and music, following the meanings attributed to each drum by noted expert drum musicians. It is argued how African cultural principles organize the musical performance suggesting that these music and dance practices may be fruitfully approached from an Afrocentered hermeneutical perspective. Further, an argument is advanced about the expressivity, philosophy and values embedded in *Candombe* drumming performances which responds to African cultural senses as well as encoding a local history of epic resistance and revitalization of consciousness.

Key words: Black Music, *Candombe*, Afro-Uruguayan Culture, Musical Performance, Afro-Latin American Music, Black Atlantic, Afrocentricity.

The notion of principles of cultural organization, as proposed by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price in 1977 has been, since then, an important tool in the comparative study of cultural processes and products in the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora. As John Thornton outlines (1992: 206), it displaced earlier notions of traces and cultural retentions that characterized previous tendencies in studies of cultural areas. Precisely, in opposition to these, the notion of cultural principles of organization in anthropology is comparable to the idea of grammatical structure in linguistic systems, where the words may change but the syntactic rules remain invariant. Parallel to this approach, the 1980s and 90s saw the dissemination of Afrocentric perspectives among African-American intellectuals, pioneered by Cheik Anta Diop's works (1960, 1974), conforming an intellectual movement in the USA around the proposals of Carruthers, Van Sertima, Karenga and, especially, Molefi K. Asante (Sundiata 1996). In Afro-Latin America[1] this movement is represented by playwright, thinker, politician and Black Brazilian activist Abdias do Nascimento. In the performative arts, within this Afrocentered approach, choreographer Kariamu W. Asante, founder and first art director of Zimbabwe's National Dance Company, proposes a set of basic criteria for the analysis of performative arts in West Africa. These criteria, comparable to aesthetic principles, are based on the senses of seeing, hearing, playing and moving, that give “touch, feeling, voice and movement” to actual performances (Asante 1985: 72).

In the Latin American and the Caribbean literary scene, the criticism made by Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda (1989) points out the use given to the *transculturación* notion coined by Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz ([1940]1987; 1965): although the transatlantic character of the Black Diasporic cultures are admitted by many scholars, in practice, the hermeneutic tools used for its study is still strongly anchored in the European literary canon, taken as an universal one. Alternatively, Kubayanda proposes studying the Diasporic literature from Afrocentered cultural perspectives. A comparable orientation is taken by Leda Martins (1997) in her study of the Afro-Brazilian *Congados*, conceptualizing the *oralitura* as a wealth of prose and poetry orally transmitted. Also in Brazil, based on Kariamu Asante's approach and some observations by

As a whole, these works contribute substantively to the study of cultural meanings, myths, metaphysics and codes alternative to European, as manifested in the cultural production and processes of peoples of Black Sub-Saharan African descent on both sides of the Atlantic world. Meanwhile, following the Postcolonial Studies, a proposal of a transcultural anthropology may be defined as a double translation, as a form of a liminar epistemology according to Walter Mignolo (2003: 233-234). It is in this sense that I consider the double comparation suggested by Abdías do Nascimento of the *trickster* figure – Elegbara, Eleggúa or Exú in African and Afro Latin American and Caribbean religions – with the dialectic principle of the Hegelian philosophy. I will return to this question later in this work.

Musical performances, especially collective drumming, singing and dancing, have also been studied from the perspective of the organizational principles and cultural criteria that guide or underlie the performance. This and earlier approaches, deployed both in monographic and comparative studies, highlight the cultural continuities in the Afro-Atlantic World. In this sense, several works and different perspectives of analysis have pointed especially to the continuity of African musical styles, ideals and structures in the American and Caribbean African Diaspora (Lomax 1970; León 1975; Carvalho 1977; Storm Roberts 1978; wa Mukuna 1979; Kubik 1989; Maultsby 1990; Wilson 1992; Gilroy [1994]2002; Ferreira 1995, [1997]2002, 2001, 2005; Frigerio 2000; Lucas 2002).

The *Candombe* drumming by people of Black African descent in Uruguay constitutes the main and most sounding aspect of the African Diaspora in its Southern end, a cultural alterity in the dominant Eurocentered representations of the nation. *Las Llamadas de tambores* – “The Calling of Drums”, a local parade – is an established multiracial cultural practice in Montevideo that has been disseminated following the migration of Afro-Uruguayans to many other urban scenes, such as Buenos Aires, London, Paris, Sydney and New Jersey in the last decades. It has adopted, earlier, in the 1950s, similar musical patterns to those of the Afro-Cuban *clave*, which has traveled all around the Atlantic. In this way, the *Candombe* drumming belongs to the rizomorphic fluxes and circuits defining the “Black Atlantic”, as proposed by Paul Gilroy ([1994]2002).

In this paper I will suggest, taking *Candombe* drumming as a case study, how Afro-Latin American musical performance may be approached on the basis of Afrocentered perspectives, that is, by observing African cultural principles that organize the making of music. Much of the foregoing analysis could be done from a structuralist Lévi-Straussian point of view. Instead, an Afrocentered perspective, where I can look for conceptual and hermeneutical tools as a means of tracing a transcultural interpretative project, is purposely taken. I will attempt a comprehension of the style and interactive fluency of movements in the performance that produces the peculiar sound and music of *los tambores* (“the drums”) in Montevideo. Second, I will argue how the meanings attributed by noted expert musicians of *candombe* drums to specific performative aspects, such as body movement and music-sound quality, indicate, metaphorically, a communication with a supernatural order. From a sociological perspective, my focus in only some experts’ meanings and world views implies a certain cut regarding the interpretations by many other drummers and the enveloping society. These, instead, do not attribute “other-worldly” meanings, and sustain an entirely secular view of this music practice. This issue points to the very secularized and des-ethnicized “common sense” of Uruguayan dominant culture (Caetano & Geymonat 1997; Guigou 2000). So, the meanings provided by *candombe* experts constitute an alternative frame of interpretation, resultant of the resistance process and the memory of the black social segments linked to the processions and *candombe* drumming groups since the ends of the XIX century.

The ethnographic material referred here arises from my participation, in several periods of the 1990s, as a musician in *Conjunto Bantú* [3], and in two other drum groups and carnival associations in Montevideo: *Concierto Lubolo* and *Yambo Kenia*. Methodologically, my relation with the phenomenon has implied two approaches. First, specific epistemological articulations, shifting
Cultural principles and body movements

The most notorious cultural expression of people of African descent in Uruguay are the drums orchestra marches that occur in some districts along the year, los tambores (“the drums”), culminating in the Desfile de Llamadas (“Callings Parade”), the great annual parade of black carnival associations, comparsas (drum and marching corps), together with their popular theater spectacles with dance and songs denominated candombes. The music and sound expression of these orchestras and that of the candombe’s dancing traditional characters is a product of a long historical path. In the first place, as a result of intercultural transformations processes among different African cultures (mainly West African Mahi and Nago, Congo-Angolan and Mozambican) under the social conditions of Montevideo, from the end of XVIII century up to the abolition in the second half of the XIX century. Afterwards, as a re-elaboration within the successive modernization processes imposed by the white elites, beginning with the constitution of the Uruguayan Nation-state, in the last fourth of the XIX century.

Along the XX century, within kinship and multiracial neighborhoods of African descent families, carnival associations were created and denominated Sociedades de Negros y Lubolos. Here the term lubolo refers to a socially categorized white subject, formerly South European male migrants who were integrated to those kin and local nets [4]. Each association was formed upon the base of a drumming group. Today, the Candombe drumming is one of the most characteristic and defining features of the Uruguayan popular culture, and constitutes a major contribution to its so called national cultural identity. Los tambores concern a musical and dance ritual performed by those candombe drumming groups in several districts of Montevideo, all the free-labor days along the year. Every group is formed by twenty to sixty drummers, mostly men, each one playing a drum. They march in the streets in disciplined formation, following a path from a district to another and returning afterwards.
lines and columns the basic-nucleus of three drums: small, medium and big one. These are called, *chico* (little), *repique* (chime) and *piano*, with treble, medium and bass sonorities. Each drummer walks with short and quick steps. A subtle swinging of legs and hip maintains the drum balanced in the same relative position: in this way the hand can hit with great impulse, tracing a precise trajectory from a point as high as the chin, and even above it, to an exact point in the patch, returning immediately to the initial position. During performance, the energy deployed by each individual is transformed in a circulating form of social energy, collectively created. Every *toque* (pattern of sound and behavior) is inscribed as an embodied memory in each of the members of the group. This memory guides the performance and is restored in each event. The transmission of every *barrio*’s repertoire of toques is acted fundamentally in a one-way learning process, seeing and hearing, and not by formal teaching, though sometimes special skill indications may be transmitted or performed individually by an expert drum musician or a friend musician to a new member.

In short, cultural principles are inscribed as embodied memory in a liminar and porous process through this cultural practice, but also, in the case of youngsters and children, by a serious playing in everyday life by which a sense of identity is constructed. A form of consciousness is manifested as a practical knowledge, that is, “being able to” – *praktognosis*, in Merleau Ponty’s phenomenological terms – by means of which distinctions are made among those “who know” (who are able to) how to play and dance *candombe*, and those “who do not” (Ferreira 1999; 2001). Performative action is apprehended through mimesis and embodying processes, guided by a phenomenon of practical consciousness. I am following here the notion of *habitus* or embodied memory as approached by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and, phenomenologically, by Paul Stoller (1995).

I will argue now that *candombe’s* body movements/sound-music texture respond to several of the African aesthetic criteria proposed by Kariamu W. Asante (1985: 74-76): the *polyrhythmic* and *polycentric* criteria, the *curvilinear* and *circular form* criteria, the *holistic* sense and the intensification of experience by *repetition*. These criterions, which I will consider as cultural organizing principles, rule the structuring of *candombe* drumming performances, the interactions between the musicians, the form of body movements and the sound-music, as a set of elements configuring a whole.

From an immediate phenomenological experience as a drum musician, it may be stated that there are different and simultaneous layers of patterns (comparable to different vocal lines in a choir) and modes of playing (comparable to vocality, i.e., the bodily aspects of singing), according to the drum type and the specific *barrio*’s performative style. All the small drums make together a single “up-lifting” continuous pattern. The big drums make one or two “down-loading” patterns in common. The small drum pattern associated with the big one's constitute the basic polyrhythmic core of *Candombe* drumming: a pair of energies in opposition. The medium drums regulate the energy of the whole with other distinct patterns, expressing individualities that generate interest, surprise and musical variety (Ferreira [1997]2002).

These features correspond in all to the central cultural criteria that Asante (1985: 74) denominates *polyrhythmicity*, embracing the notion of *multi-metric* in Robert Farris Thompson (1974) [9]. One pattern, not audible but internally deeply felt, is the transference of the body weight from leg to leg while marching. Each musical cycle corresponds to four steps. In chronological time, the performance *tempos* fall between one hundred twenty (medium-slow) and one hundred fifty (very fast) steps per minute. The following graphic representation is a basic prescriptive transcription following *Conjunto Bantú* didactical presentations (h and s goes for hand and stick respectively; capital letters represents accented strokes) as well as children’s performances. The small drum pattern and the *madera* pattern in the medium drum are these same in more sophisticated versions, but not so the big drum patterns and the *repicado* patterns in the medium drum.
hits in the small drum cycle (grouped in four equal minor patterns of three beats each) coincides with any of the four steps: they all are “up”. Three of the four main hand beats of the big drum cycle coincide with three of the four steps by cycle: they are “down”. Only one of the hand beats of the big drum coincides with a main hand beat of the small drum.

The drumming patterns must be approached as a set of body movements for a minimal meaningful comprehension of their performative practice. Every pattern implies a movement of the whole body: walking steadily in rhythm leaning on the feet, the body’s center being the source of a vibratory energy that irradiates towards the extremities. But legs, hip, body, and arms go with subtle different rhythms. So, there is a simultaneity of distinct body movements that is characteristic of the polycentric criteria in African dance and arts as remarked by Asante (1985). I will distinguish now the spatial forms of body movement in each drum type. Next, I will correlate them with the meanings given by some expert musicians of Candombe drumming.

1. The small drum – chico (little). Vertical cyclical movement of the arm from the shoulder propelling up-down the hand that slaps the drum head and quickly returns. All the performers of this drum type do the same pattern together, an ordered and reiterative movement common to all groups. A cultural principle may be pointed here - the constant energy generation - expressed locally as: “the chicos... bring the energy up-down” as said by the young but expert drummers Jorge da Luz and Miguel A. García. An initiation principle underlies the membership to the orchestra, as a form of corporate group, expressed by Drummer’s Chiefs Fernando Núñez and Benjamin Arrascaeta: “we all begin playing the chico”.

2. The big drum – piano. Cyclical movement that emphasizes the horizontal axis: the hand “kneads” pressing the drum head with the weight of the arm. A cultural principle may be pointed here now concerning the generation of a complementary energy: the energy expressed as “earth”, “floor” or “base”, according to the late expert drummer Washington Rosas. There are one or more simultaneous patterns among the big drums that coincide in the first half of the rhythm cycle. The set of big drums patterns constitutes a dynamic and diacritical symbol that identifies, first, each neighborhood’s drum orchestra style from others, and second, an ethnical identity in relation to the enveloping society. They not only signalize the Ansina, Sur or Cordón districts but,
historically, the materiality and expansion of their sound territorializes those parcels of the urban space as singular black districts: the Barrio Negro.

3. The medium drum – repique (ricochet, chime). Alternation among three modalities: the repicado, vertical cyclical movements of the hand that slaps (galleta sound) in the drum head (a similar pattern to all district groups); the madera, recurrent horizontal strokes with the stick hitting in the drum box (“wood” - madera - denoting both a sound and a pattern common to all districts and very similar to the Afro-Cuban clave pattern of three beats followed by two shorter ones). In the third modality, sometimes called “soloing”, a virtual diagonal axis is established when the “the drum speaks” individually or “talks” with another one, alternating among the vertical and horizontal axis: rim-shot strokes (timbaleteado), occasional fast slaps (galletas) impelled from the elbow and some “wood” strokes (madera) in the box. The timbaleteado strokes are given with the stick hitting tangentially to the drum head, a skill equivalent to the rim-shot in the jazz drums or in Afro-Cuban timbaletas (Mauleón 1993). Meanwhile, the left hand stays in disposition of quickly hitting at any moment, in a similar fashion to the “cat hand” metaphor learned by John Chernoff (1979) in West African drumming tradition.

The circular form in the repicado pattern, a fast arm movement from the elbow (the first one of every series shot from the arm), shows explicitly a feature in the body movements of the three drums which finds a correspondence with the principle of the curvilinear movement (Asante 1985: 76-77). However, I suggest that a most important criteria is that of repetition (Asante 1985: 81). Because it is with the intensification of the movements generated by the repetition of patterns that a polarized quality emerges in the spacial axis, according to the pattern and the drum type: vertical in the small drum, horizontal in the big drum, diagonal in the medium drum in repicado pattern or alternating among the vertical, the diagonal and the horizontal axis when “talking”.

In this respect, expert drum musicians make a distinction between the small and big drums on the one hand, and the medium drums on the other. The patterns and hand strokes in the minor drums generate “energy brought up-down”, while in the big drums certain hand strokes are like “holes [where] sound is absorbed and the energy is discharged to the floor”, as said by Jorge da Luz and Miguel Angel García. The medium drums regulate the energy of the whole set, between the expansion and the contention: the medium drums “call to lift-up the chicos [small drums] with the repicado [slap strokes]”, and afterward “order the pianos [big drums] with the madera [stick strokes on wood, the drum body]” as said by Fernando Núñez and Benjamin Arrascaeta.
As a pair of opposites, small and big drums configure a complementary principle that relates to the axis of the cyclical movements, vertical and horizontal, where the mediation of the medium drum traces a diagonal axis. The metaphors draw explicit connection between the energies deployed and the pair of binaries sky/air and floor/earth with a third party as mediator, suggesting a cosmological principle in action. In the whole, there is a continuous that generates and restores energy. Thus, each pattern is articulated with the other ones, constituting a dynamic system of interaction among the musicians. The small drums take together the same pattern in all the districts; the mode of playing however is different according to the characterization or ethos of each district style (in a more or less pa’adelante – forward oriented – style). The big drums take one or two common patterns at the same time, that identify each district at distance (“base” and “second-base” “base” and “counter-base” “simple-piano” and “piano-piano”, according to the three main districts, Sur, Ansina and Cordón).

The energy flows between the small and the big drums, while the medium ones not only add to the flow but rather regulate the whole musical performance (speed, impulse and intensity) constituting a third energy center mediating among the two other ones. This is achieved by means of embedded-musical messages in the mode of playing, as when, for example, the medium drums “slap altogether at the same time calling the small drums to lift-up”. Central to the performance of los tambores is a triangular flow of energy, structured in the unit of opposites (small / big) and a principle that I will call of “the third in action”, that regulates the set and expresses the individuality of the player (medium ones), always as a part of the collective.

In a previous work I called attention upon a “spiral chain”, a cyclical and simultaneously open alternating quality along performance (Ferreira [1997]2002: 161). A similar spiral quality has also been pointed in Afro-Brazilian Congados by Leda Martins (1997). If attention is put on a slower musical timing of several basic cycles (from half a minute up to two minutes) there is an important level concerning musical interaction: pairs of repiques (medium drums) that alternate “talks”. When one drummer “lifts-up” (“speaks”, “slaps”, “lifts-up”), the other one “goes down” (“makes wood” – madera pattern), and after a while they exchange roles: “calls and responses” in local terms.

The drummers distinguish certain moments: when “calling to lift-up”, many repique musicians “slap all together, taken by their euphoria.” Contrary to verbal interactions where superposition is meaningless and avoided as a rule in communicative processes, in the repiques’ turn-talking there is place to significative overlapping moments with the same repicado pattern that concentrates and expands the energy “calling to lift-up” inversely, they give contention to the whole with the madera pattern. The embedded messages to lift-up or to maintain are transmitted collectively in this way. Thus, as a sophisticated art, Candombe drumming presents what Gregory Bateson ([1972]1998) has called meta-messages in between multiple levels of redundancy: signals embedded between beats, repetitions within the cycle, alternating modalities around the basic
Among big drum seniors there may be too an interchange of alternate patterns. But in this case, superposition is strictly and consciously avoided: while a piano “calls”, in strictly only one cycle (equivalent to four steps), the other one makes “base” immediately, in the next cycle, they exchange roles and the second one “responds” while the first one makes “base”. This exchange continues along several cycles until a third one “closes the talking”, as says Chief Fernando Núñez. This turn-talking is especially made when the mayores want to propel the intensification of the collective energy, “calling [the repiques] to lift-up”.

It may be seen here the same “heterogeneous sound ideal” that the African-American composer and scholar Olly Wilson has stressed as “the core of underlying conceptions that define African and African-American music” (Wilson 1992: 329). It is reflected both in the nature of the “sound texture” as “the resultant qualities of sound produced when several instruments perform simultaneously”, and in the “wide range of timbres within a single line”, simulating vocal technique.

Sound/movement and energy circulate in a recurrent and holistic way in the physical space of the orchestra and along the time-span of the musical performance. The energy of the whole group – manifested in the sound intensity, the impulse (the subtle but decisive moment of hitting each stroke equivalent to tapping in jazz drumming), and the speed of the musical pulsation – takes the overall form of a cyclic and spiral alternation among the quick intentional “lift-ups” (subida) of collective energy, the maintaining of the new level (aguiante), and the slow but unintentional “slopes” (bajada). Thus, during performance, a wave of dynamic energy emerges across time; each cycle of this wave has a duration and amplitude in which may be heard the style or “calling” of each district: slow and slight in Sur, medium and slight in Ansina, quick and ample in Córdón (Ferreira [1997]2002: 167). Two encapsulated words here, “to call” (llamar) and “to lift-up” (subir), point to the orchestra’s collective regulation. The effervescence of “the drums calling to lift-up” is central to the effectiveness of the ritual in creating a community sense. Reciprocally, the sound and the music acquire the effervescence quality of the collective that produces them. The slowest oscillations in the collective creation of energy, in “lifts” and “slopes” in the time of the performance, constitutes the vital breathing with which the community style of each district, its “call” (llamada), is defined.

Drummers categorize the most basic district styles in short expressions without reference to the sound and texture quality or any other formal qualities of the sound-music produced. Instead they talk about Sur as “more balanced (cadencioso)”, Ansina as “the most warring”, and Córdón as “more free”. Although in a certain moment one and other style may coincide in musical tempo or sound intensity, they are expressing a general attitude and disposition in the overall creation of energy: a collective ethos. Drumming and dancing candombe constitutes a symbolic system that attains reality only in actual performance, where embodied memories are restored and guide musical and dancing behavior. The cultural practice is transmitted so, generation to generation, by means of performance occurring in the public sphere of those districts.

Performance in candombe’s drums is thus conceived as a manipulation of physical matter – body, impulse, space in the street, deployed energy – that is metaphorically related then with the discursive realm. To know a style implies the specific ability to tune, as a bodily consciousness phenomenon, with its collective production. Taking the relationship between the performance and the embodied self in this way, the singularity of each drum pattern (toque) resides, firstly, in its relation to the overall sound-music texture of the “voices” of the drums (sonido). As an instrumental song, the meaning of a toque emerges between its position in the system of patterns (musical language) and its anchoring in the physical act of playing collectively a drum: developing and feeling its “voice” as being part of the whole group, the sound texture of each toque contributing to the overall texture: galleta (slap), masa (kneaded), palo (open stick stroke), timbaleteado (rim-shot), madera (wood). The “grain of the voice” (in Roland Barthes’ sense, [1972]1991) emerges here as a recognizable quality between the musical words and the physical sound.
Cultural principles and meanings

Each specific movement in every drum type traces significant distinctions in the sound and the space in which it happens, cyclically intensified by repetition, which feedbacks in the interaction with other players. Asante notices that “intensification is not static, it goes by repetition from one level to another until ecstasy, euphoria, and possession, saturation, and satisfaction have been reached” (Asante 1985: 81). In this respect, the expert drummers Benjamin Arrascaeta, director of the carnival association Elumbé, and Fernando Núñez, director of La Calenda, refer to the performance in terms of “concentration”, of “going concentrated in total possession”.

The intensification by repetition is the condition for an experience, the meaning of which, according to some candombe drumming experts, suggests an additional, supernatural, invisible, but audible, dimension. This aspect corresponds to other criteria noticed by Asante (1985: 77): the aspiration to a supernatural meaning that arises from the space dimensionality of the performance. Further, there is here what may be considered the most important criteria pointed by Asante: the experience of an epic memory without which “perfection cannot be achieved” (Asante 1985: 80). I will now discuss these specific aspects.

The representations by candombe’s expert drummers of their performance experiences are of two main types: the warrior archetype and that of the ancestral. In the first case, the “warrior” (guerrero) also describes the overall ethos of candombe drums performance and, especially, that of the small drums. In the second type, there is a presentification of an ancestral of the group, “a Black Old man” (Negro-Viejo), especially in big drums, or specific to the musician as individual in medium drums. The first type of representations is currently expressed in the public sphere, including names of black carnival associations along the XX Century such as “African Warriors” (Guerreros Africanos), for example, and in the Afro-Uruguayan poetry, as in Cristina Rodríguez Cabral production (1990). Meanwhile, the second type of verbalized meanings is transmitted in a face-to-face relationship inside a domestic sphere. These meanings refer to connections between this world and the world of the ancestrals, the visible and the invisible. After a rehearsal of Conjunto Bantú in the house of its director, Tomás Olivera Chirimini, the expert drum musician José Pedro Gularte said emotively to young drummers and dancers: “it is the Viejos [Elders] that are playing at our side”.

In those two types of representations about the small and the big drum performances, it is not the individual musician who speaks through his instrument but rather an emergent entity, the “drum”, is the voiced subject of a mythic entity. The individual appears as a mere agent of mediation between one and another world: while playing and with the energy that deploys and circulates in the group, the individual flows in the sound, he melts in his instrument, embodying the myth in the ritual: “A Black Old man who plays through the drummer”, “plays behind”, “hitting the back of the drummer” says Miguel A. García.

The medium drum shares this condition – “the repique speaks” affirms Benjamin Arrascaeta – but it also appears as a dynamic symbol that identifies the individual and his personal ancestral. “When I play it is him – Washington Ocampo [an ancient repique player] – who plays with me” says José P. Gularte to the young players of Conjunto Bantú. A Pan-African principle of social organization may be suggested here, that of the first man: the founder of a new group, a style or, in this case, a personalized style of drumming (Chernoff 1979: 55; Ferreira [1997]2002: 135). The presentification of the past may be seen as a cyclical time conception, something that crosses and connects meanings and the performance features showed above. In this respect, Robert Farris Thompson (1974) emphasizes ancestrality as one of the central aesthetic values – he calls it “canon” – in West African performing arts.

A strong metaphor concerning drum playing says that “they row”: in the more literal level this makes reference to the very synchronized and regular form of the arm movement in all the small drums, disposed in columns, one behind another, guiding by sound and kinetic perception the
whole orchestra. But, in an other level of interpretation, the image of navigating suggests the feeling of a trip to a mythical world, comparable to African worldviews in which the sea divides one world from another, the earth of the ancestral from that of the living. In these worldviews the sea is as much a passage road as a great barrier (Thompson 1984), while, in the African Diaspora, it also metaforizes the traumatism of the Atlantic Passage (Segato 1995; Ford 1999).

The shifting from warriors to rowers points here to two complementary features of the ritual, both as forms of ethnic resistance to cultural and political domination. First, it is the experience of playing drums as a special form of mythical trip, despite the hegemonic context of a historically very secularized and Eurocentered national culture: an “other-worldly” experience and a counter-hegemonic history – an embodied memory of a return to a mythical Africa. Second, the warring ethos marks a territoriality in the urban space in relation to other black groups and the enveloping white society: a context of racialized stereotypes and a memory of the State surveillance over public circulation and interpersonal relationships of black persons. As Uruguayan historian Milita Alfaro has shown, the black carnival groups confronted, in the passage of the XIX to the XX Century, the police control and the rejection that the white elite manifested to their existence and its multiracial integration (Alfaro 1998: 78, 107, 153). Previously, in the first half of the XIX century, there were frequent controls, prohibitions and limitations by the government over African peoples’ rituals and festival celebrations that had in the drums a central constituting element (Ayestarán 1953: 68, 71).

 Mythical meanings are found also as a semantic ambiguity in the public term “to call” (llamar) and the most private “to lift” (subir) among drum musicians. “To call” refers to the social convocation of the group, from a mythic foundational narrative: the “call” to meeting every African Society in the Colony by means of the drums, being suggested also that the “calling” would be to supernatural or ancestral entities. The term “to lift”, as presented above, describes a social energy phenomenon, individual and collective, and, at the same time, it is a metaphor that refers to an “other-world” order of experiences. As in the metaphors of the warriors and the rowers, the experiences of the group are symbolized in performative and mythical ways, in a context where to enunciate it openly in the public sphere implied confronting the dominant régime of representations. Along the XX Century, the sonorous black parades challenged the white elites’ project of homogenization and exclusion of differences in the Uruguayan Nation-state formation, imposing an Eurocentered racialized cultural hierarchy. Meanwhile, the possibility of a mystic experience stood in opposition to the dominant politics of secularization and privatization of the religious experiences in Uruguay (Guigou 2000; Caetano and Geymonat 1997). This experience represents, thus, a double resistance both against religious and ethnic exclusions.

As a social philosophy embedded in the very musical performance, in the way that Chernoff (1979) considers drumming and musical sensibility in West Africa, I suggest that a central aspect of candombe drumming sensibility resides in the relationship among the parts and not in the parts by themselves. It is a very complex interaction among relatively simple parts. The focus of interest and sophistication of the performative musical system is centered in the complexity of the established triangular interaction among the three drum-actor types and not in the complexity and sophistication of an individual alone. This means that, although it may be easy for an individual to play one candombe musical pattern (a musical sentence), the actual complexity resides in relating it with another simple but very different pattern, executed by another individual. In other terms, a central value is placed in the social interrelation and not in the individual alone. This value is expressive of the presence of alternative Pan-African principles of social organization, the hierarchy of the seniors and the equality of the members of the corporate group, where equality doesn't have the same sense as in West-European individualism: everybody will certainly become a senior man and someone a first man (Kopytoff 1987: 18).

Around these values, in turn, are located the relevant aspects of an inscription, an African code, about the experiences of the African descent people in the Nation-state: on one hand, the corporate group and the celebration of their ancestors; in the other, the mythical trip and the warring ethos as a “secret code” in which the memory of the group’s resistance strategies in relation to the dominant culture, the state control and the enveloping white society, is registered.
and embodied in this practice. The interpretative action of expert drummers conveys an ethnicized and racialized meaning to the whole performance: they are the Black Old men who play, independently of the racialized social identity of the drummers, white, brown or black, in everyday life. Actually, drum groups and *candombe* processions respond to Stuart Hall's idea of a “secret code... bases of each rhythm and each movement of the body... of an Africa that « is alive and well in the Diaspora»” (Hall 1996: 72). Through this code the accumulated ethnic experience and the resistance strategies of the peoples of African descent are registered as part of each national formation in the Diaspora, as Rita Segato (1998: 143) suggests. It is a stable repertoire of constituent images of an alternative myth, ways of conviviality that their institutions promote, and ways of contradicting and confronting the dominant culture. The manifestation of this repertoire in the *candombe* drums may be seen in its performance as an embodiment of a strong epic memory sense. As Asante points out, in African and African-American artistic expression a memory retrieved delivers “the pathos, feeling, and dramatic experience without telling the literal story”. It is a broad type of memory sense that “unearths the emotional feeling realm” and brings a spiritual dimension to its experience. Not an idea or thought that can merely be intellectually comprehensible, but “the image within the structure of the thought that provides for the ethos” (Asante 1985: 80).

Finally, as a metaphor for the critical activity of interpretation of *los tambores*, I will take a central discursive and figurative *topos* that intervenes in the formulation of sense in West African cultures and the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora. It is about a dynamic principle of individualization, communication and interpretation, centered in the character of the figure of the *trickster*, of ambivalence, multiplicity and mediation element par excellence. It is associated to an entity denominated Eleggúa, Elegbará, Bará, Eshú or Exú, according to different regions of West Africa and the Diaspora. It is a mythological meta-figure, vehicle of the process of signifyin(g), as Leda Martins points out, quoting Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: “it doesn't hardly exist as a character in a narrative, but mainly as a vehicle of the own narrative” (Gates, 1987, *apud* Martins 1995: 57).

It is important to say clearly that this concern points here only to an epistemological procedure – a way of interpretative activity to comprehension – and by no means to a pretension of a historiographical reconstruction that would connect the *Candombe* drumming to a specific West African tradition. The trickster’s dynamic criteria or African dialectic principle, as Afro-Brazilian thinker Abdias do Nascimento have asserted, allows an interpretation of the cultural system of *candombe* drums as a significant totality. It acts like a regulatory principle of the unit of the opposites, between the energies of the small drums and the big ones. It is personified in the medium drum as a principle of individualization and the third in action: the mediation and energy regulation of the whole. This criterion, as brightly pointed by Nascimento, is an African philosophical equivalent to the Hegelian dialectic principle, introducing the dynamics in every system, the opening of the cyclical to a spiral time conception and the possibility of the transference of universal energy principle, *axé*, into human agency. In a racialized musical politics, as a principle of ambivalence and multiplicity, it both seduces and misleads whoever is strange to *los tambores*, playing with the duplicity of their voices, the ambiguity and indetermination with which the patterns are presented as musical words. Comparable to the tactics of the *opacity* (Carvalho 1993) and that of the *double voice* (L. Martins 1995) in Brazilian *Congados*, this principle unearths a semantic strategy of the appearances, a resistance culture in front of power as suggested by Muniz Sodré (1983, *apud* L. Martins 1995: 55).

**Final considerations**

With this brief examination and interpretation of the performative culture of the African descent people in the Southern Afro-Latin American Diaspora, I want to point out, as anticipated in the introduction, its constitution as an alternative and liminar domain to the dominant and hegemonic Eurocentered culture of Uruguay. At the margins and interstices of the nation a complex and sophisticated musical practice was organized where the body became a place of resistance. The African aesthetic senses, ideals or cultural criteria pointed out by Robert Farris Thompson, Kariamu Asante and Olly Wilson, were found as featuring aspects of *candombe*
drums performances. Moreover, the “calls and responses” through all of this music may be seen from Samuel Floyd’s hermeneutical perspective as giving a sense of its capacity to circulate social energy, embodying racialized memory and cultural work, and expressing the struggles and fulfillments of existence (Floyd 1995: 226-266).

Although the people of African descent linked to the candombe practices have the European cultural influence, given the urban multiracial context and the monocultural education by the state and media dispositives, their drumming and dancing responds, basically, to the same organizing principles of African art and culture. These principles are embodied and transmitted by the practice of performance itself, from one generation to another, learned in community but not taught, as an ethничal resistance dimension. Meanwhile, as part of a historical resistance strategy to a secularizing and homogenizing dominant culture, their main verbalized meanings are transmitted orally, face-to-face, in the domestic sphere intimacy, mediated by interpersonal trust relations.

In this work I have tried to contribute to a transcultural reflection, pointing to the productivity of an Afrocentric perspective in the realm of the cultural interpretation activity of music and dance performance. The assumed epistemological strategy, descentering both a dominant cultural perspective and a structuralist ordering approach, is coherent in giving analytical and interpretative emphasis to the cultural practices of African descent peoples in the Atlantic world. I think this would not be different to Kubayanda’s criticism over Afro-Latin American literature, asking for a counter-balancing Afrocentered approach to an interpretative activity that has strongly been fixed to European cultural canons. Afro-Latin American music and dance performance encodes not only the actual historical experiences of black peoples in the New World, as it is also embedded with the mind and the spirit of Africa in its ritual symbolism and oral traditions. As Afro-Caribbean intellectual Paget Henry (2000: 60-61) has pointed out, drumming and dancing as an ego-descentered way to reach knowledge and consciousness is, first of all, an African cultural creation. Otherwise, the assumed Afrocentric perspective of study by no means must be necessarily a negation of the processes and transformations occurred in the New World as some Black Atlantic theorists have feared. Instead, it may be connected in a fruitful dialogue, as I have tried to show here, with local cultural keepers and retrieved epic memories.

Notes

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[2] I take here, as a provisional category, the idea of “Afro-Latin America” from the discussion presented by George Reid Andrews (2004: 7), to refer to those societies “where people of African ancestry constitutes at least 5 to 10 percent of the total population”. The term “Afro-Latin American” is used to refer to “those individuals considered by themselves or by others to be ‘brown’ or ‘black’,” and to those cultural elements and practices considered to be of “black” African ancestry.

[3] A stage group that reenacts Afro-Uruguayan candombe scenes; it was founded in 1971 by Tomás
Olivera Chirimini who followed his earlier experience with the Black Independent Theatre in Uruguay. As a bass musician and a chico drummer afterwards, I participated in Conjunto Bantú along extended periods of time between 1993 and 1996, traveling in Latin-American and Europe, which included casual encounters with such important groups as Kiti Na Mesa, from the former Zaire, in Mallorca (Spain), 1993, and Rumba de La Habana, from Cuba, in Montevideo, also in 1993.

[4] I understand the term “race” strictly as a sociological concept pointing to a categorization of social relationships that attributes negative values to one group and positive ones to the other, constructed along historical processes of domination and subordination. In no way it refers to a biological human category (Gregory & Sanjek 1994; see Guimarães 2002 for this conceptualization and current debate in Brazil).

[5] Both notions have been elaborated by several studies on African music (Jones 1959; Nketia [1975] 1982; Chernoff 1979; Arom 1985) but it is not my intention here to discuss the distinctions and equivalences between them.

[6] An analysis of Candombe drumming patterns, following Simha Arom’s approach, may be found in Ferreira (1995), where I developed the reciprocal or inter-contrametrical parameter, and presented an analytical model of the improvising patterns.

[7] In 1981 Abdias do Nascimento defined Exú as an embodiment of “the principles of contradiction and dialectics, already in African thought centuries before Hegel and Marx; without these principles there would be no movement and energy flowing, the Axé that allows the whole life” (IPEAFRO 2007).

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