

Dissonance in the Revolution

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*...Ven que te quiero cantar de corazón así/La historia de mis raíces/Rumba, son y guaguanco todo mezclado/Pa' que lo bailes tú/Mira, ay quien no baila en la habana/Candidato /Pa' rumbiar en la cadencia/Represento a mis ancestros toda la mezcla /No lo pierdas bro /Latino Americano de la habana te lo mando con sabor mejor/Aprenderás que en la rumba está la esencia/Que mi guaguanco es sabroso y tiene buena mezcla /A mi vieja y linda Habana / un sentimiento de mañana Habana/todo eso representas/CUBA... (“Represent,” *A lo Cubano*)*

The acclaimed work of the Cuban rap group *Orishas*, whose lyrics reflect the intense reality of Cubans in the last decade, represents the roots of the hip-hop movement in Cuba. The lyrics I start my paper with show a group that loves and is proud of the domains of Cuban culture, music, and religion. However, the success of *Orishas* was not first accomplished within the territory of Cuba; it took hard work and the eventual migration of the group members to Paris, France where their work was finally acknowledged. I have chosen Cuban hip-hop music and specifically the work of *Orishas*, as my topic because music in Cuba is a reflection of our character, the familiar element that connects us with ourselves and to the outside world; it is through music that Cuba is best described. Analyzing Cuban music is the best way to know and measure how the country as a whole feels. In this paper, I will demonstrate how the group *Orishas* has broken through the traditional boundaries of Cuban music and opened the doors for Cuban hip-hop, making it possible for a new generation to express both national identity and individualism in a manner especially relevant for Cubans of African heritage.

This group came together mainly on the streets of Havana, in some of the municipalities of Havana with a predominantly black population. Two members of the group, Yotuel and Ruzzo, were previous members of *Amenaza*

(“threat”), one of the first known hip-hop groups from the streets of Havana in the beginning of the 1990s. With options for rap performance censored by the government because of its American influence, they migrated to France in 1996 and together with two other Cuban musicians (Flaco-pro and Roldán) already in Europe; created *Orishas*. (Cantor, 2000)

The Afro-Cuban band *Orishas* was the first hip-hop group to gain an international audience. An important characteristic of *Orishas* is that it has always built its music around typical Cuban genres like *son*, *rumba*, and *gua-guancó*. *Orishas* has its headquarters in Paris, France, where the group launched a record deal with Universal. They have sold millions of copies of their three compact discs: *A lo Cubano* (2000), *Emigrante* (2002), and most recently, *El Kilo* (Paoleta, 2005). The song “537 C.U.B.A.” from the CD *A lo Cubano* samples the well-known Compay Segundo song “Chan Chan” released on the Buena Vista Social Club’s 1997 record. Their identifiable Cuban hip-hop sound was a total success, energizing Cuban rap, and giving the movement a defined Cuban identity. (Llewellyn, 2003a) The work of *Orishas*, always enriched by the use of drums, and the traditional *sonero* voice of one of its members, gives them a distinctive sign of a *Cubanidad*.

Orishas is the name for gods used in *Santería*, a Cuban-born religion that has its roots in the mixing of African Yoruba religion and Catholicism. In the crisis period of the 1990s it was accepted that the Cuban people turned to religion as a desperate measure to find a solution through prayers and invocations to the African gods. The Cuban government that always saw religion as a threat to the ideology of the revolution could not stop the wave of religion even among the younger generations. To name the group *Orishas* is an acknowledgement, respect, and a welcoming to the Afro-Cuban religion *Santería*, a significant part of Cuban culture that was not being portrayed as an active element of Cuban life. As open followers of the Afro-Cuban religion, the group *Orishas* took an important role within that religious community, not only with the name of their group, but they also by portraying in their lyrics their love for the Afro-Cuban religion.

Analyzing the song “*Canto Para Elegua y Changó*” on their first CD, they combine a prayer commonly used in *Santería* in Cuba to call the gods with some of their devotions for the religion. This song, the lyrics of which I present below, is commonly used as a document for many Cubans to learn and keep alive the influence of African oral traditions in this culture.

*Dice ori baba olorun, ori baba Olofin, ori baba Olorde,/ommi tuto, ana tuto,
tuto laroye tuto ile, tuto mo, tuto owo... Ani cumbambao Ochun, Ombao chenita
ache omi babalawo. Ache orunmila, ache ochaleri, ache Elewa, ache chango
kabo kabetsi, baba tomi dice ache ibeyi, ache bombo orisha baba...*

Hijo de Eleggua , mi santo Eleggua/mi vida Eleggua , Maferefun el rey de los caminos/la ley de mi destino, rojo y negro como el tinto vino/quien me abre los caminos con su garabato/jicara d'aguardiente, humo de tabaco, vestido de sacoquien me deja ver cuando estoy opaco/siguele los pasos, pidele salud/y que te aleje de los malos ratos/pido yo la bendicion pa' expresar mis sentimientos/ todo lo que me pidas , dalo por hecho, no profeso/mi filosofia cuando se trata de Echu/Maferefun Elegua/To ibam echu.

Canto pa' elegua y para Changó/Canto de verdad lo digo yo/Canto pa' elegua y para Changó/Canto de verdad lo digo yo/lo que digo es lo que pienso/lo que pienso es lo que siento/Canto pa' elegua y para Changó/canto de verdad.

Yo como un rayo digo loco, lo que siento/mi voz que ruge como el viento/blanco y rojo represento, changó virtuoso potente com un oso, bien perezoso, jocosos , fogoso/Santa Barbara bendita es tu chango/guia por el buen camino a tus hijos como yo/dale la luz señora de virtud , fuerza, esperanza/en ti confianza , con tu espada avanza/mi micro es tan fuerte como el machete de Ogun/mi son tan dulce, como el melao de Oshun, y soy un,/soy un Orisha, si, tu boca cierra/enviado por Olofi para gobernar la tierra (Canto para Eleggua y a Changó, CD A lo Cubano).

This song is a tribute to two of the most important *Orishas* of the Yoruba culture that African slaves brought to Cuba: *Eleggua* and *Changó*. It starts with an African prayer to the *Orishas* asking them for a blessing. The first part of the song is adoration to the *Orisha Eleggua* who is in charge of opening and closing the roads of life to humans. In Cuba, for followers of this religion, it means that to keep a path of happiness and good fortune a person needs to invoke and celebrate *Eleggua*. This is followed by a chorus, which states, "I sing to *Eleggua* and to *Changó*, what I say is what I think, and what I think is what I feel." The second part is dedicated to the *Orisha Changó*, a brave *Orisha* of war who controls the thunder and the sword. This is a deity that controls wars, bad temper, and punishes the excesses that human tend to fall into like alcoholism, fights, unfaithfulness, etc.

...Haya lejos donde el sol calienta más/olvidé mi corazón, un arroyo y un palmar/Dejé mi patria querida hace más de un año ya/ Por más que me lo propongo mi herida no cerrará...

..Vengo de donde hay un río, tabaco,y caña veral/ donde el sudor del guajiro hace a la tierra soñar...Me arrancaré el corazón y esperaré mi regreso para sacarlo otra vez y colocarlo en mi pecho...

..Dónde estás tú, mi Rampa/El sol que canta/la Catedral/el Capitolio/se levantan en el oído/de estas voces/23 y 12/Vedado/Paseo del Prado/tus leones lado a lado/ forman parte de mis tradiciones/mis emociones/eres tu mi Cuba/como tu ninguna/Kábío sile o/soy yoruba que no quede duda/que si lloro es porque la extra-

ño/no ver mi malecón, a mis amigos de mi zona/los que nacieron conmigo/los que jugaron conmigo... (537 C.U.B.A. A lo Cubano)

These lyrics, extracted from the song “537 C.U.B.A.” from the CD *A lo Cubano*, reflect elements of nostalgia in *Orishas*’ work (Schechter, 1999), a theme latent in Cuban culture due to the massive migration that Cubans for diverse reasons have faced for more than 40 years and that has torn families apart. In this part there is a moment of reflection about the places and people that were familiar to *Orishas* and helped to create the identity of *Cubanidad*.

This group started in a very antiestablishment way in the streets of Havana with no support from the government because of the movement’s critical lyrics and defiant attitude toward the system. The work of the group *Orishas* made the market for Spanish-language rap expand enormously in Europe. It also helped the government change its point of view towards Cuban hip-hop to the point of establishing talks with the rap movement. Even Fidel Castro met with the group and asked them “Are you the group that is making such a fuss?” (Llewellyn, 2003a) *Orishas* has many fans and also detractors on the island, who claim that they have betrayed the image of Cuban rap, trying to pursue a more international image. Cuban hip-hop producer Ariel Fernández said that European labels come there to “sniff around” looking for the next *Orishas*. But he argued that the Cuban reality and the nature of daily life make Cuban music more vibrant and raw than what *Orishas* has been producing from Paris. (Llewellyn, 2003a)

I disagree with such a statement because it took the fame of *Orishas* to recognize the strength of Cuba’s hip-hop movement. But it was outside the island that the group achieved such status and once a group breaks local barriers and reaches international status, that group does not belong to one place; their work belongs to the world. *Orishas*’ international exposure as a group can be seen when comparing the sampling of traditional music in *A lo cubano*, *Emigrante*, and *El Kilo*. The last two discs show creativity, authenticity in their work; and their selection of live instruments in their recordings attracts a wider audience from a globalized world. The second CD, *Emigrante*, relates to all the emigrants like *Orishas* who are living far from their home country and share the life of an immigrant.

Cuban Popular Music in the 1990s

This paper has thus far focused on *Orishas* because this group is one of the most visible examples of fresh artistic expression that reflects the Cuban reality of the 90’s. The outstanding quality of Cuban music has made the world recognize Cuba as one of the beacons of popular music in a global context. For generations Cuban music and musicians have found a place in the world-

wide hall of fame of music. With the new network of global communication, Cuban music can now be studied in any university in the United States and also be played in a nightclub in Japan. Most recently, in the 1990s, the success of the Cuban group, Buena Vista Social Club, gained worldwide reception (Farr, 2003).

It took almost all the 1990s for the hip hop movement to become accepted in Cuba. Some reasons for this delay include the extreme success of the Buena Vista Social Club, also the development of *Timba Cubana* in the same decade, a style of Cuban beat that was a response to the salsa style developed in the United States in the 1980s. Cuban *salsa* groups like *Los Van Van*, *Bamboleo*, *La Charanga Habanera*, *NG La Banda*, or Paulo F.G. had a great success with young Cuban dancers and audiences.

In the middle of the 1990s North American musician Ry Cooder and a collaborating counterpart, Cuban musician, Juan De Marcos, gathered together old Cuban musicians. These musicians, forgotten from the mainstream music, recorded a CD and made a documentary movie, both of which were huge successes. However, the exceptional musical accomplishments of Buena Vista elicited responses mainly from audiences in the United States and the rest of the world, audiences nostalgic for a lost connection with the Cuba of the 1940s and 1950s. To some extent young musicians working in Cuba resented the fame of Buena Vista Social Club. Cuban drummer Equis Alfonso, also known as "X," from the Cuban group *Sintesis*, stated that "the fame of Buena Vista Social Club put Cuban music back 40 years, affecting the development of Cuban musicians, prolonging the myth of old Cuba, the Cuba of nightclubs and old cars." (Llewelyn, 2003a)

The music of Buena Vista Social Club does not act in response to the needs of Cubans who deal with issues such as the long economic embargo that the United States has imposed on the island, the collapse of the socialist system and its effects on the island, and the Special Period, so named because of the loss of Cuba's main trading partners; with the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the government was forced to resort to austerity measures and rationing, tightening the domestic economy. It was a time of chaos with deflation of currency, shortage of oil, a period of hardship. The most important point was the return to religious beliefs as a comfort for those in despair in a country ruled by a secular communist party. Other issues that Cubans have had to struggle with are the reemergence of drugs and prostitution, the unofficial black market required for survival, and massive migrations to the United States in rafts or by the lottery. Hip-hop is the only one of the Cuban music genres that has openly addressed these issues. Cuban hip-hop has also challenged the perceived racial democracy that Cuba's post-revolutionary government has portrayed to the world for the past 40 years.

Defining Cuban hip-hop

In Cuba, as in any other socialist system, the communist government controls all means of production; there is no private property, and everything belongs to the government. The government also controls the ideological work of intellectuals and artists and their influence on the political atmosphere of the island. If an artist attacks the image of the revolution in any art type or form, there can be drastic consequences for the artist. In the case of hip-hop, its American influence and the negative image that American hip-hop had in the nineties also helped to create a negative impact with the government slowing its acceptance in Cuba.

Cuban hip-hop music relates to, yet differs from, American hip-hop. The influence of American hip-hop has been very strong in the creation of a Cuban hip-hop movement. Cuban hip-hop started in the 1990s as an underground movement. It exposed important political and economic issues affecting Cubans—especially those born since the revolution—as it did similar issues earlier in the beginning of the rap movement in the United States. (Fernandes, 2003)

An important aspect that influenced the lack of publicity for Cuban rap at home and overseas was the low demand in the market of that time for Spanish speaking rap. In Castro's government there is no competition among music agencies or record labels because the government runs them all. Cuban music agencies are thus not accustomed to taking risks and would not invest in publicity, marketing campaigns, tours, or shows for rap musicians. Under these commercial circumstances and the aggressive political atmosphere that evolved around the hip hop movement in the United States, not a single Cuban label released in the 1990s was a hip-hop CD. However, despite so many limitations, when hip-hop awareness arrived in the island and Cuban hip hop bands started to form, the movement became very strong and with a solid goal, to express via music the daily concerns of the younger Cubans of Havana. (Smith, 1998)

However critical of the status quo, Cuban hip-hop movement has never been a vehicle for radical change in the Cuban political system. The paradox is that the Cuban hip-hop movement does not support an intervention from the United States or welcome the Miami radical right-wing exile group that want to destroy Castro's regime. In this way it differs from the American hip-hop movement that has shifted its ground from political to a more commercial movement. While it started with some groups like Public Enemy, 2 Live Crew, or N.W.A. who had strong political lyrics, American hip-hop has largely developed in a different direction. The majority of songs today portray an image of consumerism, lust, thugs, and gangsters. The hip-hop move-

ment in Cuba has a defined political agenda, and calls for an improvement in the relationship between the government and this younger generation.

Other disparities between Cuban hip-hop and American hip-hop can be found in their lyrics; for the most part, Cuban rappers do not talk about guns, killings, drugs, thug life, give women bad names, or create an image of capitalistic consumerism of platinum chains or sipping expensive champagne. Such images do not reflect Cuban life, and would not resonate with the younger generation. While most of the hip-hop songs reflect the daily life of Cubans on the streets, Cuban rap is not as aggressive as American rap; there is no Cuban equivalent to gangsta rap. (Llewellyn, 2003a) Nevertheless, some of Cuban hip-hop singers and bands do follow an image similar to the U.S. rappers with large baggy clothes, clothes with American brands like FUBU, Nike, or Tommy Hilfiger. (Robinson, 2004)

The rapper image is not monolithic in Cuba nor is it in the United States. In Cuba, some are fond of following the Afro-American image; others are looking for an identity inside the rap world that defines them as Cuban rappers where they wear alternative clothes like t-shirts with the revolutionary Che Guevara's image and green military hats or *boinas*. Many Cuban rappers, lacking money, cannot afford to buy *guayaberas*, a traditional Cuban shirt that is now mostly sold in the souvenir stores for tourists. The use of Afro American haircuts among black Cubans is not just a particular signature of Cuban rappers; Cubans favor it in general with some shaved, others with dreadlocks, etc.

Regarding music equipment, there are more similarities with the rap movement in the United States. Although the United States is a rich country, access to equipment is limited for prospective rappers who often do not have the necessary capital to buy music equipment. In Cuba the hard economic constraints limit Cubans from buying audio systems and musical instruments. Although very limited and expensive, the option of using a turntable to rap and sampling over gives them extra potential. However, one thing that both movements have in common is their love and pride for what it means to be black in a racially prejudiced society, their love for their roots, their color, their features, and life is announced with clear satisfaction in their lyrics. (Smith, 1998)

We opened the doors for Rap in Cuba

Orishas has challenged the role of the Cuban government towards this new generation of artists. One of the members of *Orishas*, Roldán, said in an interview “*Orishas* is Cuba for a newer generation.” (García) Eventually under internal and external pressure, and due to the international popularity

of *Orishas*, the progressive minister of culture, Abel Prieto, funneled US\$32,000 worth of audio equipment through the rap association Hermanos Saíz. He has helped change the attitude toward the Cuban art movement in general, and as a result, the government reluctantly started to sponsor annual rap summer festivals in the town of Alamar (Llewellyn, 2003b), avoiding the same mistake of repression committed towards rock and roll and reggae movements in Cuba in the 1970s and 1980s.

In one of the most critical moments of Cuban economic and political transition, the Cuban government accepted the presence of hip-hop and created a rap agency called *Hermanos Sainz* that promotes and controls the rap movement in Cuba. Susana García Amorós, director of the newly formed government-sponsored Cuban rap agency, which will release a compilation album under the *Aseré Producciones* label, stated that rap has invaded all forms of music and even TV in Cuba and that it is part of Cuban reality (Llewellyn, 2003a). The agency has Pablo Herrera among its managers, one of the founders of the rap movement in Cuba, and he is helping to put the voice of Cuban rappers out into the world; however, there is still a lot of struggle with bureaucracy in Cuba. One of the issues that musicians face is the lack of feedback: for example national record labels like EGREM do not inform their musicians of sales figures, or tell them in what countries the records are being sold. In general, there is no promotion or marketing work. (Llewellyn, 2003a) Now, every year, the rap festival is celebrated in Alamar. This area on the east side of Havana has a high concentration of Afro-Cubans. The “Alamar projects,” as some people call them, are a reproduction of the Soviet building style where massive ugly apartment blocks buildings were spread all over the neighborhood for Cuban families to live in. These apartment blocks were not initially built for blacks to live in, but were intended for the relocation of people whose houses collapsed during hurricane seasons, or when the government displaced them to build tourist hostels, etc. However, fulfilling its responsibility to promote Cuban culture, the Cuban government has exercised more control recently over the rap festivals, and over who performs, and thus over what is said. (Robinson, 2004)

Conclusion

Orishas' music has impacted and has influenced Cuban culture since the nineties. Its music is an example of how popular culture can serve as an instrument for social change. This generation of Cubans has never had an agenda of bringing down Castro's government. They do not want to change the revolutionary system of Fidel Castro, even though many of them belong to a generation that has not enjoyed many of the accomplishments of the revolution. This generation has only seen economic and political hardship. All

they want to do is to be an active part of the system, and to be accepted by the government as a new generation of artists with a new image of music, and a vision of a more richly integrated society. The hip-hop movement in Cuba wants to be recognized and accepted within the island, and the great majority of artists want to create their music at home and for home.

This generation of Cuban rap musicians, mainly blacks, were all born under the Cuban revolution. They are educated, some are college students, but most of all they are the sons and daughters of ordinary working class people. The great majority of these musicians do not come from families with a legacy of intellectuals. They, like every one else on the island, have limited access to information and limited possibilities for travel around the world, but they have had the talent to express their frustration and their goals through this new movement, Cuban rap. Cuban life demanded a new musical approach, and the value of this musical experience that the group *Orishas* achieved can be a tool for change for generations of Cubans to come.

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