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# DANCING TO THE SAME BEAT

*There is a longstanding historical and cultural relationship between Congo and Cuba via the slave trade and the 'return' of Cuban music to Africa. Do historic connections enable contemporary musicians from both worlds to recognise similarities in each other's music?*



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**I**ntroducing two musical powerhouses  
This paper focuses on the links between two of the arguably most popular global musical styles, the music of Cuba and the Democratic Republic of Congo. I came to this topic through my work as a musician immersed in both styles. As I played and interacted with musicians and audiences it became clear to me that there was more than a superficial connection between the two musical genres and I wanted to discover more. In this paper I provide some background on the music of the two countries and examine features shared by these two musical powerhouses.

Cuba, the largest Caribbean island, is famed for its outpourings of glorious music. There are a myriad of styles originating in Cuba, all a blend to a greater or lesser extent of European and African styles. The genre that I wish to focus on is Cuban *son*, the popular dance music of Cuba from the mid 1940s onwards. The term *son* might not be familiar to the reader, however one of its offshoots *salsa* will be more recognisable. Whilst numerous musical styles have emerged from Cuba, the name *salsa* has, among the wider international audience, become the generic term used for Cuban *son* and related music from Cuba, Latin America and the USA. In reality *salsa* – a style of music commonly associated with Cuba – was developed in Puerto Rico, New York and South America. Its roots are in Cuban *son* with inputs from Puerto Rican and South American popular music and its instrumentation is inspired by jazz big bands. With the global success of the Buena Vista Social Club project (playing *son*) and the almost worldwide popularity of *salsa* dance classes, *salsa* and Cuban music have perhaps grabbed the attention of the world more than ever over the last two decades.

In Africa there are two Congos, Republic of Congo (former French colony) and the larger Democratic Republic of Congo (former Belgian colony). The two capital cities Brazzaville and Kinshasa on opposite banks of the river Congo, are geographically the closest capitals in the world (with the exception of Rome and Vatican City).

These two countries, between them covering a great expanse of Central Africa, have for many years produced prolific amounts of wonderful music. In fact in the 1950s Congolese popular music, with its distinctly modern yet African sound, was one of the few styles that swept to popularity throughout the African continent. To this day, Congolese music continues to be a powerful musical force pan-Africa. In the UK, Congolese music is undoubtedly less visible to the mainstream audience than *salsa*. However, the popularity of Congolese *rumba* extends to the African diaspora particularly the East and Central African communities, and the UK audience is no exception.

#### From Congo to Cuba...

Contemporary scholarship in ethnomusicology has made frequent reference to the links between the music of Congo and Cuba (Sublette, 2004; wa Mukuna, 1992; 1999). As is the case with the development of many musical styles, the slave trade had great impact on the development of Cuban music, with a significant input from people taken from the Congo basin. Cuba was established as a Spanish colony in 1511, and remained under Spanish rule – bar a brief period of British control in 1762 – until it was ceded to United-States custody in 1898. The Spanish Government imported very few slaves themselves, preferring to trade with slavers (Sublette, 2004: 77). This led to the slave population of Cuban being made up of people from diverse ports of embarkation. Evidence suggests that slaves from the Congo Basin were being taken to Cuba from the very early days of the colony right up until after the official abolition of slavery in 1886, with estimates putting the proportion of slaves of Congo origins at 32%, the largest slave contingent (Grandio-Moraguez, 2008). In addition to people forcibly taken from Africa, settlers on the island included Europeans from Spain and beyond, the largest Chinese population in the Caribbean and immigrants from nearby islands such as Hispaniola (now Haiti/Dominican Republic). The vast range of musical styles that developed in Cuba grew out of this complex mesh of imported cultures. Scholars have entered



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into much analysis of and debate on the roots of Cuban music; charting its exact lineage is problematic for much of this musical development occurred before the advent of recording or the use of ethnographic research methods. In addition, records of the distribution of slaves and their origins are vague and inaccurate. Those that do exist give slaves assumed identities loosely based on their port of embarkation (Bergad, 1995; Grandío-Moraguez, 2008; Ortiz, 1975). However, there is no doubt that the music of slaves taken to Cuba from the Congo basin played a huge role in the development of Cuban music (Cabrera, 1979; Garcia, 2006; Ortiz, 1975; Sublette, 2004).

#### ... and back again

The 'return' of Cuban music to Africa in the 1930s has been well documented (Sublette, 2004, Topp-Fargion, 2004). In the 1930s several factors combined to allow Africa to become one of the main audiences for the outpourings of Cuban and Latin American music from primarily USA-based record labels. For instance, what was then a young global record industry needed to find a new market after the 1929 Wall Street Crash decimated its home customer base. In an attempt to survive the recession that followed, 'RCA Victor' and the 'Gramophone Company' collaborated in 1933 to produce the 'GV' series for the African audience. 'GV' reportedly stood for 'Gramophone-Victor', however, it appears that musicians and consumers substituted their own interpretations, the most popular among Congolese being 'Grand Vocalistes' (Topp Fargion, 2004: 2). Initially aimed at the West African market the 'GV' releases found popularity across Africa, particularly in the two Congos (Topp Fargion, 2004, 2). The series ran until 1958 after having produced around 250 releases which were most popular in the mid-1940s. The first track to be released on the 'GV' series was a Don Apiazu recording of *El Manisero*, a Cuban classic by composer Moisés Simons.

Belgian Congo, with its wealth of opportunity, was a draw for immigrants from Africa and the wider world. Congo-based foreign entrepreneurs played an important role in the pan-African success of Congolese popular music, with the formation of, and investment in, a thriving record industry. Coupled with a comprehensive network of radio stations, the industry helped promote Congolese music abroad. 'Congo Jazz' – as it was known – became popular with African and white audiences alike in the 1950s. The popularity of Cuban and other Latin American music in the two Congos led to a large number of records being released to this market. Cuban favourites included top Cuban artists Miguel Matamoros and his various groups, Septeto Habanero and later Orquesta Aragón.

It became common practice for Congolese bands to include Cuban and Latin American songs in their repertoire. Modelled on Cuban bands, instrumentation included Latin American percussion and horn sections. Initially musicians embraced Latin America not just in the music but also in the associated performance practice; they adopted Spanish names, wore outfits inspired by Latin bands and copied the dance steps. Vocals were often sung in mock Spanish and Spanish words were interjected into the music. In an interview, Congolese guitarist and bandleader Franco is quoted as saying:

Well nobody understood Spanish. Nevertheless, we took a dictionary and searched for words that would sound good and we used them regardless of their true meaning.  
(Franco, Interview with wa Mukuna, 17 March 1983)

#### Congolese music finds its own voice

Congolese music is commonly described in terms of generations; an in-depth description of the generations and the social and political inputs into the development of Congolese music is however beyond the scope of this paper. The music of the 1950s-70s was termed 'the second generation' and there were clear links between the development of this music termed *rumba lingala* and Cuban *son*. But this was to change in the early 1970s as the music moved into the so-called 'third generation' with the emergence of 'youth bands' and a conscious move away from Cuban elements in Congolese popular music (Ewens, 1994; wa Mukuna, 1999; White, 2008). The Youth Bands dropped the percussion and the horn section and the drum kit and electric guitars became prominent in the music. The emphasis changed to give more importance to the dancing section of the song, with choreographed dance moves and a driving snare drum rhythm – a defining feature of 'third generation' music. Zaiko Langa Langa also introduced a vocalist called an *atalaku* who shouted out dance moves and played percussion in the final dancing section of the song, termed *seben*. The 'modern' but distinctly African sound of this music, coupled with an established recording industry in the country, ensured that Congolese *rumba* maintained popularity throughout Africa.

In the early 1990s Congolese music moved into 'fourth generation' with the arrival of a band called Wenge Musica. In 'fourth generation' Congolese music there was even greater emphasis on dancing and the *seben* with more focus on lead guitarists and their skills. The role of the *atalaku* also increased, in addition to calling the dance moves the *atalaku* now sang on occasions and shouted out people's names for money and favours.





### Links to Cuban music are retained

So, there was Congolese input into Cuban music from the very early days of the Spanish colony. Cuban musical styles – in particular *son* – found popularity worldwide, including a large Central and West African market. I would argue that the Congolese audience heard familiarity in this music that was ‘returning’ to Africa and embraced the music. As Congolese music modernized, it moved away from the obvious similarities with Cuban music. However, the musical styles retained significant commonalities. These include the way that songs are structured and interaction between the band and audience.

There are remarkable similarities between the structure of Cuban *son* and Congolese *rumba*. *Son* has a two-part structure, the first section, often called the *largo* section, is where the story is told. It comprises an introduction, verses (usually two or three, but the number is not set) and a link into the next section, called the *montuno* section. The *montuno* is the section that most interests me. It is the ‘dancing part’ of the song and has grown to be by far the longest section of the song, especially in live performance. Having played and taught Cuban music for many years I have grown to realise the richness in structure and musical organisation of the *montuno*. This is, I believe, one of the reasons that Cuban *son* and *salsa* have gained such huge popularity globally. In keeping with Nketia’s theory of African musical organisation, the *montuno* section features a short repeated chord progression, which is built from layers of interlocking percussive parts (Nketia, 1974). Over this backing, there are short repeated vocal chorus with call and response lead vocals, instrumental solos, changes in dynamics effected by musicians either dropping out or playing with differing intensity and repeated interlocking horn lines that build-up in density and volume, called *mambos*. All of these sections are open in length, allowing for interaction between the musicians and the audience. This enables the band to create a musical conversation with the audience.

In similar fashion, in ‘fourth generation’ Congolese Rumba, the ‘dancing part’ of the music is of paramount importance. *Rumba* has a three-part structure, the *rumba* section is where the story is told, again it starts with an introduction followed by a number of verses; the exact number of verses may vary. The song then moves into the refrain where there are a number of choruses sung in harmony, interspersed with vocal solos. The song then moves into the part that the dancers have been waiting for, the *seben*. This, in common with *montuno* in *son*, is by far the longest section of the song, especially in live performance. In *seben*, the electric guitars come to the fore with extended lead guitar solos. Adhering to Nketia’s model of musical organisation, the groove is created by layers of interlocking repeated patterns – termed *ostinato* – over a short repeated chord progression (Nketia, 1974). Over this, the singers execute choreographed dance moves in response to vocal cues from a vocalist called the *atalaku* with a half-rapped, half-sung style. Sections are separated by rolls on the drums and are, as with the Cuban *montuno*, open in length, allowing for interaction between musicians and audience. Another feature shared with *montuno* is the way



that dynamics are created through instruments dropping out or playing with differing intensity.

I have referred to the interaction with the audience that is an inherent feature of both *seben* and *montuno*. As a musician immersed in Latin music, I expect this relationship as part of a performance. The band will interact with the audience: extending sections in response to the dancers, instruments will drop out or increase their volume at times to create dynamics, and solos will be inserted. All of this creates excitement in the performance. Indeed, when playing many other styles, I am struck by the relative lack of flexibility and the resultant change in relationship with the public. However, when I first played with a Congolese band I was pleasantly surprised to experience the same interaction as that present in Cuban music. The freedom that this allows means that each performance is individual, tailored by action and the reaction of the band and the audience.

In both Congolese *rumba* and Cuban *son* the focus is on the final section of the music, *seben* and *montuno* respectively, the section intended for dancing. This is by far the longest section of the song. Within this there are significant commonalities between the two styles. Not only do they share a common timeline, both adhere to Nketia's model of musical organisation with the groove created by layers of interlocking *ostinati* over a short repeated chord progression. The open nature of the sections and the use of dynamics allows for a great deal of interaction with the audience.

### Conclusion

I have shown the significant commonalities between the music of Congo and Cuba. Why is this important? Prior to this research there was little or no consideration of contemporary links between the two styles, indeed the concept of Congolese music moving away from Cuban music was cited as one of the developments of 'third generation' Congolese *rumba*. My research shows that, as Cuban *son* and Congolese *rumba* evolved, they maintained strong similarities, not in terms of instrumentation but, perhaps more importantly, in terms of musical organisation, and performance practice.

Although there is a great deal of writing about and research into Cuban music, there is surprisingly little detailed discussion about the musical inputs from Congo. Whilst Congolese music has achieved widespread popularity across Africa, Western audiences may not be directly aware of this great music. However, they will have listened and danced to musical styles with Congolese input at their very roots, as journalist and academic Ned Sublette states:

Much of the sway of the world's popular music today comes one way or another from this large zone of Africa, as a *lingua franca* so basic that hardly anyone stops to think: Why is this our rhythm? Why are these the moves we like to do? Where do they come from? We may never be able to answer the questions fully, but we do know that a lot of it comes from the Congo and a lot of it comes from the Congo via Cuba.

(Sublette 2004: 175)

Considering the prominent importance of Congolese popular music it is, on one level, surprising that it has attracted little international scholarly attention. However this could be explained by the fact that the Democratic Republic of Congo has a history of instability and unrest, which serves to isolate the country from the international community. Surely as one of the powerful contemporary styles, this music warrants more scrutiny.

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### About the author

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### Keywords

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## GLOSSARY

**Atalaku:** The vocalist who raps and sings over the *seben* in Congolese music. Introduced into third-generation Congolese music by the band Zaiko Langa Langa in 1982.

**Largo:** The name given to the first, lyrical, section of a *son* arrangement.

**Mambo:**

- i) A musical style incorporating big band jazz arrangements and Cuban rhythm as popularized by Damasio Perez Prado in the 1950.
- ii) Repeated, interlocking horn lines which occur during the *montuno* section of a *son* song.

**Montuno:** Literally 'from the mountains' in Spanish, the word has two meanings:

- i) The repeated cyclic pattern played on the piano, tres and bass in *son* music.
- ii) The second and longest section of a *son* and salsa song incorporating call-and-response vocals, instrumental solos and horn mambos.

**Pregón; pregones (pl.):** Vocal improvisations during the *montuno* section of a *son* arrangement. Interspersed with a chorus sung in harmony.

**Refrain:** The chorus section of a Congolese *rumba* arrangement. Features a a harmony chorus interspersed with vocal solos, usually of the same length as the chorus.

**Rumba:** The word *rumba* has been used for a range of musical styles including:

- i) A Cuban musical form which features percussion, call-and-response vocals, and dance. The three main styles are *guaguancó*, *yambú* and *Columbia*;
- ii) The *sones* played in the 1920s during the 'rhumba' dance craze in the 1920s in the USA. The name *rumba*, sometimes spelt *rhumba*, was misapplied to this music during this period. The term is used to this day in ballroom dancing, although it is pronounced differently. The use of the term *rumba* in this context has led to a great deal of confusion;
- iii) The name given to Congolese popular music which emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Initially the music had clear links to Cuban *son* but as the music developed the name Congolese *rumba* remained.

**Rumba lingala:** A name given in Africa to Congolese *rumba*.

**Salsa:** A generic term that has come to be used for Cuban *son* and related music from Cuba, Latin America and the USA. Developed in Puerto Rico, New York and countries in Latin America, it has influences from Cuban *son*, Puerto Rican and Latin American popular music as well as jazz big bands.

**Seben:** The final section of Congolese popular music.

**Son; sones (pl.):** A musical style which emerged in the east of Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century and grew to be the popular dance music of Cuba.