Ancient Text Messages of the Yorùbá Bàtá Drum: Cracking the Code (SOAS Musicology Series)

Reviewed by Jesse Ruskin

Although African drum languages have been of scholarly interest since the late 19th century, only a few book-length works have been published on the subject. As one of the most in-depth studies of an instrumental speech surrogate to date, Amanda Villepastour's book makes a valuable contribution to this literature. Her subject is the *bàtá*, a family of double-headed drums from southwestern Nigeria that is closely linked to *òrì?à* (deity) devotion among Yorùbá-speaking people. From the time Yorùbá drum language became an object of scholarly attention in the 1950s, the bàtá has endured a reputation as a poor speech surrogate technology, perceived as inferior to another more popular Yorùbá “talking drum”—the *dùndún*. This book sets out to challenge that perception.

Villepastour’s thesis, introduced in the first chapter and systematically developed in the subsequent three, is that the bàtá is a sophisticated medium of communication used to “encode” rather than “imitate” the tones and inflections of the Yorùbá language. Its reputation as a poor speech surrogate, she argues, is due to the highly specialized nature of the drumming tradition, the limited cultural knowledge of contemporary listeners, and an environment of dwindling traditional performance contexts. It is not, she amply demonstrates, a matter of ineffective design or technique. Villepastour credits two “research collaborators” with major contributions to the book and composes biographical profiles of each. Bàtá drummer Chief Alhaji Rabiu Ayandokun (with whom I have also worked) is Villepastour’s primary teacher and informant. For this reason she is careful to say that the book represents only Ayandokun’s “drumming style and his method of encoding Yorùbá speech” and does not seek to “explain bàtá drum language generally” (33). Despite this caveat, Villepastour makes some useful generalizations about bàtá speech surrogacy. Most notable is her collaboration with another researcher, computer scientist Tunde Adegbola, on a model of how bàtá drummers convert natural language to drum strokes by means of an intermediary code language (106-108).

The second chapter critiques earlier literature on bàtá, most particularly a work of organology by music scholar Darius Thieme and a practical manual by Nigerian artist Muraina Oyelami. Villepastour corrects Thieme’s nomenclature for bàtá drums and takes issue with his analysis of the ensemble’s musical organization. She suggests that the latter may be due to his misunderstanding of certain differences between Nigerian and Cuban bàtá music. Villepastour’s assessment of Oyelami’s work is more positive. Her analysis of bàtá speech is basically an expansion of Oyelami's scheme, which maps drum strokes to the tones and vowel sounds of the Yorùbá language. To further her claim that the bàtá is a sophisticated speech surrogate technology, she demonstrates how the grammar of the drum is consistent with the principles governing vowel production by the human voice.

The third chapter presents what is, to my knowledge, the most technically detailed comparison of speech surrogacy instruments to date. The author’s purpose here is to show both how the bàtá system differs from others (its technical uniqueness) and why this is so (its cultural uniqueness). To do this, she compares the lead drum of the bàtá ensemble with that of the dùndún—the talking drum against which bàtá is so often negatively assessed. Through transcription and aural analysis, she demonstrates that while the dùndún is designed to more directly imitate the sounds of spoken Yorùbá, bàtá drumming employs a system of encoding natural language that is no less precise. She then links each drum’s speech surrogacy method to its physical properties, musical role, and cultural function. The bàtá’s coding method is attributed to its original function as an instrument of war, and later as a ritual instrument associated with pre-Christian and pre-Islamic deity devotion. It was intended to be understood only by a limited audience—the drummers and the cultural “insiders” with whom they were communicating. The dùndún, on the other hand, a widely used instrument in both sacred and social contexts, including popular music, is designed for maximum intelligibility. Villepastour argues that because scholars have not previously investigated these differences in technology and function in any detail, they have perpetuated a mistaken notion of the bàtá as an inferior communicator.

A compelling technological metaphor for bàtá speech surrogacy pervades the text and is suggested in the very title of the book. Villepastour represents the bàtá as a machine (a “telegraph without wires” as one Cuban elder called it), a conveyer of coded “text messages,” and the central link in an ancient communications “technology” (13-14). Chapter four lends this metaphor some empirical support through an examination of *?nà bàtá*, a code language

based on bàtá drum strokes that is used to translate between spoken Yorùbá and its drummed representation. In collaboration with computer scientist Tunde Adegbola, Villepastour develops a model of ?nà bàtá as “an interface (that is, an intermediate language) between the natural language of Yorùbá and the machine language of bàtá” (108).

The epilogue occupies less than five pages, but its contribution is significant. Villepastour builds a tripartite model of the bàtá “speech surrogacy process,” which includes the bàtá drummer, the drum itself, and the listener/participant (120-121). A chart is then drawn listing the criteria necessary for each part to contribute successfully to the system of communication. This model may prove useful for future research on how drum languages operate in particular performances and how the feedback of listeners—often discussed but seldom studied—contributes to the performance.

The book includes a CD with bàtá repertoire and illustrative examples performed by Villepastour’s primary research collaborator Chief Alhaji Rabiu Ayandokun. The CD was recorded in a professional studio during Ayandokun’s 2007 residency at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. The materials chosen represent common bàtá repertoire, including proverbs, praise poetry, and devotional rhythms. Villepastour notes, however, that the recordings are not intended to represent “commonplace bàtá performance practice” (2); they are intended, rather, to support the scholarly argument and the educational presentation of the text. This happens in several ways. First, due to a lack of bàtá performers in the UK, all the parts of the ensemble pieces are performed and overdubbed by Ayandokun. Second, whereas the choice and sequence of repertoire in a typical bàtá performance is always context dependent, the recordings on this CD are chosen and arranged for illustrative purposes. Third, Ayandokun and Villepastour decided to record the pieces without the variation and improvisation one usually finds in bàtá performance, due to the “aural clarity” required for analysis of drum language and its presentation to new listeners (3). In another departure from common practice, many of the pieces are recorded with voice-overs so that listeners can follow the texts as they are drummed. On certain tracks, the recording levels are also adjusted for maximum clarity of the lead drum, and do not represent the actual performance levels of a bàtá ensemble. The CD nonetheless succeeds both as an integral companion to the text and as a valuable primary source in its own right.

As a collaborative effort, the book and CD package has something to offer both scholars and practitioners, those interested in theories of musical speech surrogacy and those interested in its content and continuity. Villepastour’s analytical orientation and her teacher Ayandokun’s expressly “pragmatic attitude” converge in a project that seeks to document and understand a dying art form. As Ayandokun describes his investment in the work: “When researchers have an interest to learn about the bàtá, I have to tell them what they want to know. Otherwise this thing is dead” (16).

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