

Rhythm as Memory: The Drum Across the Diaspora



The First Beat

Begin with a sound.

Not a word. Not a name. Not an entry in a column. A sound - a hand striking a stretched skin, a palm finding a membrane, a rhythm falling into the air with the authority of something that has been falling into the air for centuries. The drum is playing. It is playing now - in a *terreiro* in Salvador da Bahia, in a *casa de santo* in Havana, in a Nyabingi groundation in the hills of Jamaica, in a ceremony in New Orleans that the tourists call a parade, but the community calls a homegoing.

The drum did not cross the water as an artifact. It crossed as knowledge - carried in the hands of people who knew how to make it, how to tune it, how to speak through it. And it crossed as something more: as memory. The rhythm that a child in Salvador carries in her body without knowing it came from a village in present-day Nigeria - that rhythm is the ocean's return. The drum is the water's memory made audible. It never forgot its tongue.

While the ledger struck names from columns and replaced them with numbers, the drum carried what the names carried - lineage, belonging, a whole world of relation - in a language no clerk

could read, no colonial authority could ban, no distance could finally sever. The Atlantic carried away people. It could not carry away their songs.

What the Drum Remembers

Robert Farris Thompson, in *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (1983), traces how Yoruba, Kongo, and Fon aesthetic and spiritual forms survived the Middle Passage and re-emerged in new sacred practices across the Americas. Thompson's work is foundational because it does what the colonial authorities refused to do: it treats African cultural forms as sophisticated systems of thought - with their own logic, their own ethics, their own epistemology - rather than as primitive survivals or degraded imitations of European culture. The drum, in Thompson's analysis, is not a relic. It is a technology of memory.

Consider the batá drum of Cuba - a double-headed, hourglass-shaped instrument sacred to the orichas of the Yoruba pantheon. The batá speaks. Its rhythms reproduce the tonal patterns of the Yoruba language, and in the ceremonies of Santería - the Regla de Ocha - it carries prayers to the divine that words alone cannot reach. The drum did not arrive in Cuba fully formed. It arrived in the hands and the memories of people who had been torn from the places where it was played, and who rebuilt it - carved new wood, stretched new skin, retuned the rhythms to new circumstances - without losing the grammar of the original. The batá is not a copy of a Yoruba drum. It is a Yoruba drum, grown in different soil.

Or consider the atabaque in Brazil - the tall, conical drum that leads the rhythm in Candomblé ceremonies. Three atabaques play together, each one carrying a different voice in a polyrhythmic conversation that is, in its structure and its purpose, a continuation of West African musical practice. The rhythm is not improvised. It is inherited. And it is inherited not through notation - no one wrote it down - but through the body. The drummer learned it from another drummer, who learned it from another, in a chain that stretches back across the Atlantic to the shores where the rhythm was first played.

In Jamaica, the nyabinghi rhythm - played on three drums: the bass, the funde, and the repeater - carries Rastafarian ceremony, but its roots reach into Kongo and Akan drumming traditions that crossed the Atlantic in the same holds as the people who played them. The nyabinghi is not a Jamaican invention. It is an African rhythm that survived the crossing and found new ground in a new soil, carrying the memory of where it came from in every beat.

European authorities tried to silence these forms. They banned the drum - in Jamaica, in the American South, in Cuba, in various colonies at various times - because they understood what the drum could do. The drum could assemble. The drum could communicate across distances that the overseer could not control. The drum could carry messages in a language the colonizer did not speak. The bans were not irrational. They were strategic. The drum was a threat because the drum was a living archive the empire could not seize.

And the bans failed. The drum went underground. It played in secret - in the woods, in the *cabildo*, in the back room of a house that the authorities did not search. It played when it was forbidden, and it played when it was permitted, and it plays now. The bans are gone. The drum remains.

Rhythm as a Language the Ledger Could Not Read

The drum is not music alone. It is a language - a system of communication, of prayer, of historical transmission that operates outside the written word and outside the colonial vocabulary that contained the written word.

In West Africa, the talking drum could replicate the tonal patterns of spoken language, carrying messages across distances that the human voice could not reach. The drum spoke. It said names. It announced births and deaths. It summoned the community. It was, in the fullest sense, a medium - not merely an instrument but a channel through which a community addressed itself.

In the diaspora, the drum carried something else. It carried the memory of a tonal world the ledger could not hear. The clerk who wrote a number where a name should be could not hear the name the drum was still saying. The colonial authority who banned the drum could not read the rhythm that was still transmitting. The drum's memory is invisible to the ledger because the ledger operates in a different epistemological register - the register of the written, the counted, the visually recorded. The drum operates in the register of the sounded, the felt, the bodily transmitted. These registers do not intersect. The drum is invisible to the ledger, and the ledger is deaf to the drum.

Glissant, in *Poetics of Relation* (1990), offers a concept that helps us understand why the drum survived: "opacity." For Glissant, opacity is not obscurity or confusion. It is the right of a culture to be understood on its own terms, without being reduced to the transparent categories of another culture. The drum's memory is opaque to the ledger. It resists translation into the colonizer's terms. It cannot be entered into a column. It cannot be priced. It cannot be banned in a way that finally silences it, because it operates in a register the ban cannot reach.

This is why the drum survived. Not because the empires failed to suppress it - they tried, repeatedly, violently. It survived because it occupied a space the empires could not see, could not hear, could not reach. The rhythm was carried in the body, and the body crossed the water, and the water could not take what the body refused to give.

Ma'at and the Rhythm That Endures

Ma'at holds that truth is woven into the fabric of the world, and the body remembers what the paper forgets.

The drum that never forgot its tongue is Ma'at in action - the truth of a people persisting through centuries of attempted erasure, carried not in columns but in cadence. The child in Salvador who

moves to a rhythm her grandmother taught her, who moves without knowing that the rhythm originated in a village she has never visited, is carrying a truth the ledger tried to erase. She is carrying it in her body. She is carrying it because Ma'at insists that truth cannot be fully severed from the world, and rhythm is one of the ways it refuses to be severed.

The dance that encodes history, the gesture that repeats across generations, the rhythm that surfaces in a cousin who grew up an ocean away - these are not coincidences. They are returns. They are the water giving back what it kept, in the form it kept it: not as a document, but as a pulse. Not as a record, but as a rhythm. Ma'at does not guarantee that the truth will be easy to recover. It guarantees that the truth will be there - woven into the fabric, held in the water, carried in the body - for anyone who reaches for it.

Christina Sharpe, in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), reminds us that the wake is not only trauma. It is also persistence - the continuation of Black life in and after violence. The drum is the wake's most audible form. It is the sound of persistence, the sound of a people who refused to be emptied by the crossing and who carried, in their hands and their feet and their breath, the rhythms that would rebuild the worlds the trade tried to destroy.

Why This Matters for Those Who Build

Why does this matter now, to those doing the patient work of building?

Because cultural practices are assets no archive can seize. The drum is not a relic. It is a living tool, and the community that preserves its rhythms preserves its memory. And communities that preserve their memory can build stronger coalitions - because memory is the ground on which recognition stands.

When a rhythm in Bahia rhymes with a rhythm in Kingston, the organizers who recognize that rhyme are not appreciating music. They are mapping kinship. They are hearing the ocean's return - the same water carrying the same memory to two different shores, where it grew into two distinct traditions that still carry the same ground. The recognition of that shared ground is the first foundation of shared work. You cannot build a coalition across shores if you do not know the shores are connected. The drum tells you they are connected. It has been telling you for centuries.

We must hold this without flattening. The batá is not the atabaque, and the nyabinghi is not the djembe. The drum in Salvador is not the drum in Kingston, and neither is the drum in London. Each carries its own weather, its own accent, its own soil. The batá speaks Yoruba tonal language in a Cuban *casa de santo*. The atabaque speaks Yoruba and Fon rhythms in a Brazilian *terreiro*. The nyabinghi speaks Kongo and Akan memory in a Jamaican hillside ceremony. They are related, but they are not identical. To trace what the sea returned to all of them without pretending the shores are the same - that is the discipline. Difference and kinship rest together in the same open hand.

From Rhythm to Rite

Return now to the drum.

It crossed the water in the hands of people who refused to let it go. It survived the bans the empires imposed. It carried memory in a language the ledger could not read. It plays now - in Salvador, in Havana, in Kingston, in London, in every city where the diaspora gathered and kept what it carried.

But the drum is not the only form the water kept. It carries rhythm, yes. But memory also travels in rite - in the practices that honor the dead, that pour libation, that insist the ancestors are still present, still owed, still part of the living family. The drum carries the rhythm of the living. The rite carries the presence of the dead. And the water that kept both returns both - to every shore, in every tongue, for anyone who reaches.

The next essay follows the water from rhythm to rite - from the drum that carries the living's memory to the libation that carries the dead's presence. The ocean kept both. The ocean returns both. And the family that receives both is the family that remembers itself whole.

The cloth is still being woven, and your thread is already among the many.

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