trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



Musical Dialogues between Cuba and West Africa in the Cold War

Elina Djebbari

In the middle of the 1960s in Cuba, young Malian musicians created the band Las Maravillas de Mali. The essay explores the political and musical transatlantic dialogues between Malian and Cuban musicians in the light of the cultural diplomatic exchanges initiated between Cuba and newly independent socialist African countries within the Cold War.

PUBLISHED	October 6, 2025
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	English
TOPICS	Cultural Diplomacy · Music
SPACES AND PLACES	South Atlantic · Africa · Caribbean
PERIODS	The Atlantic Space Within Globalization
KEYWORDS	mali, cuba, the wonders of mali, orquesta aragón, music, salsa, charanga, cultural exchanges, cold war
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/musical-dialogues-between-cuba-and-west-africa-in-the-cold-war/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Elina Djebbari

Associate Professor · Anthropology · Paris Nanterre University · France

Elina Djebbari is an anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, associate professor at the University of Paris Nanterre. Her current research focuses on the bollo music dance genre (Côte d'Ivoire/Liberia) and its underlying dynamics of transatlantic circulations and creolization.

On a Saturday evening of January 2015 in Cotonou, Benin, Malian musician Boncana Maïga arrived on the stage at the grand finale of the second edition of the Benin International Salsa Festival. [1] After words of praise from the festival organisers to introduce their guest of honour to the audience, Boncana Maïga ceremoniously displayed the transverse flute he was about to play.



Boncana Maïga at the Benin International Salsa Festival, Cotonou, January 2015

Source: © Inès Ahouansou

He accompanied the gesture with an account explaining that this very flute was presented to him as a gift by the Cuban government during his music studies undertaken in Havana in the mid-1960s. By making the flute the symbol of the high-level musical training that led him to developing a successful international career, the Malian musician showed how much he had benefited from the cultural exchanges established between Mali and Cuba in the frame of a postcolonial diplomatic rapprochement. Not only had this experience forged him as an accomplished musician, but it was also still very vivid in his memory more than 50 years later.

The ways the musician's personal journey became intertwined with the political interests fostered during the Cold War era by Cuba and Mali is the focal of this essay. It explores the political, musical and interpersonal relationships revealed by the crisscrossing of Malian and Cuban musicians across the postcolonial Atlantic. It therefore sheds light on the cultural exchanges initiated between Cuba and newly independent African countries throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

During the Cold War, various newly independent African countries adopted socialist policies. The Republic of Mali was one of them, after achieving independence from France on 22 September 1960. Such anti-imperialist positioning led to developing privileged relationships with other socialist countries worldwide. In addition to offering an ideological and political model opposed to Western imperialism, these new

economical and political partnerships also took the form of cultural exchanges. The USSR, China, North Korea and Cuba became Mali's main partners in the realm of culture. Exchanges consisted mainly in sending Malian students and civil servants abroad for training, building cultural infrastructures, organising cultural events and reciprocally facilitating tours of national artistic ensembles. For instance, Malian choreographers were sent to Moscow and youth managers to China and North Korea, while musicians were trained in Cuba.

In light of the new political alliances that took shape during the Cold War (such as the Non-Aligned Movement), Cuba developed a foreign cultural policy tailored for African countries, and negotiated several cultural conventions: with Egypt and Guinea in 1960, with Ghana, Mali and Algeria in 1964, with the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Tanzania in 1974. [2] The Mali-Cuba cultural convention signed on 14 January 1964 stipulated that among its purposes was the development of "cultural relations in the fields of science, culture and the arts between the two countries in the interest of strengthening the friendship and mutual comprehension between Cuban and Malian people." [3]

In order to address the enactment of this transatlantic postcolonial cultural diplomacy agenda and its implications for music, this paper looks closely at the ways these policies were implemented on both sides of the Atlantic. It draws on archival research as well as ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Cuba, Mali and Benin. The first part of the essay addresses the meaning of cultural diplomacy in the Cold War and the role of music in the process of cultural decolonisation in West Africa. Then, it investigates the journey of ten young Malian students sent off to Cuba to receive musical training starting in the mid-1960s, before looking at the 1970s state-sponsored tours of the Cuban Orquesta Aragón in West Africa. The last section discusses the ways the cultural exchanges fostered by this postcolonial diplomatic network challenged notions of roots and belonging in an era otherwise saturated with nationalist ideologies.

Music, decolonisation and cultural diplomacy in the Cold War

Cultural diplomacy is conceived of as a way to establish and sustain the influence of a given political, social, and cultural model outside of it. In the context of the Cold War, cultural outreach was seen as an index of state power and prosperity. As Lisa Davenport puts it, "culture itself became a measure of a nation's wealth and power." [4] In the field of cultural diplomacy, music and musicians have been involved in various strategies aiming at developing foreign policies and international relations over different periods of time and between various stakeholders. A wealth of scholarly works has brought into evidence, for instance, the extent to which the US State Department's cultural diplomacy relied on music, and especially jazz, in these international exchanges.

In the context of the Cold War, political alliances established through the Non-Aligned Movement and the Tricontinental conference fostered cultural partnerships with African countries in order to sustain anti-imperialist ideologies. Cuba in particular developed cultural exchanges with many African countries. These programmes involved sending Cuban artists abroad as well as welcoming foreign artists and productions in Cuba. Interestingly, the development of cultural relations with foreign countries at large featured as an important point addressed at the first National Congress of Culture held in Havana in 1962:

> *"All performances by foreign artists shall be given special attention in the mass organizations' programs, and must be attended by capacity audiences, both for the political value of such an attitude, and because of the high cultural and artistic value afforded to our masses by being in contact with the best foreign artists, a privilege which used to be reserved to the bourgeoisie."* [25]

This excerpt acknowledges both the "political" and "cultural and artistic" values expected from the welcoming of foreign artists in Cuba. It also presents these shows as a way to reclaim a former privilege of the bourgeoisie. Communist and anti-imperialist ideologies blend together to provide the masses with access to culture and art.

In the realm of the cultural exchanges with Africa, Cuban political leaders drew on the history of the slave trade to enhance and legitimize the new political relationships with Africa. In various speeches and writings, Fidel Castro referred to the contribution of Africans to Cuban culture and the sharing of a "common blood." [5] As Hauke Dorsch rightly puts it with regards to the education programmes established between Cuba and Mozambique, "ideas of an Afro-Atlantic connection informed these education programs." [6] The reference to a shared history stands therefore as an important background for the implementation of postcolonial cultural diplomacy between Cuba and Africa. Interestingly, while Cuba expressed its solidarity with Africa in its anti-colonial struggles for independence and signed cultural conventions to bolster cooperation with the continent, Cuban music was already playing a key role in cultural decolonisation on the other side of the Atlantic.

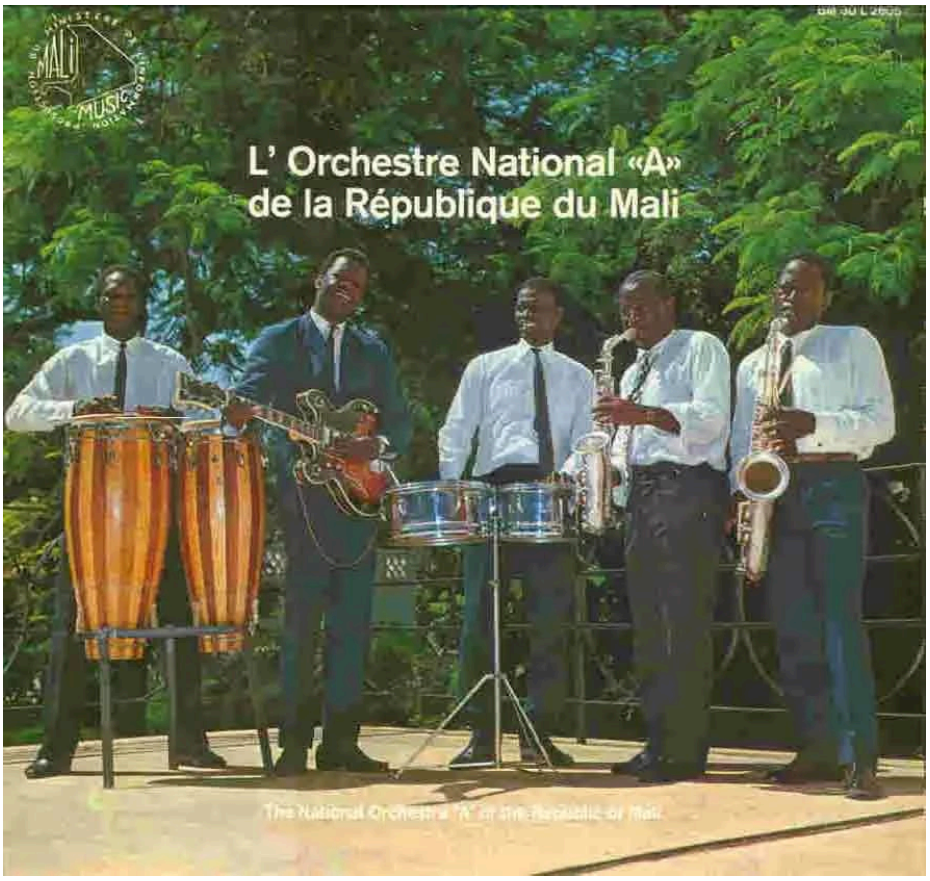
Indeed, in 1960s Mali, people danced to the sound of Cuban music along with rock and twist in cities' nightclubs (see *Nuit de Noël*, a Malick Sidibé photograph. Music dance styles coming from the New World were so popular that it can be considered that the soundtrack of the independence era.

Cuban music was already well-established all over the continent during colonisation. Its popularity spread widely in the 1930s–1940s with the arrival of the GV series 78rpm records produced specifically for Africa by Gramophone between 1933 and 1958. Cuban music considerably influenced the creation of many genres of modern African popular music and Congolese rumba is certainly the most renowned example of this phenomenon. The song *Independence Chacha* by Grand Kalle et l'African Jazz is often considered the hymn of the independence era. Thus, the diplomatic exchanges with Cuba increased the popularity of Cuban music, which was already part of a new African culture.

In the framework of cultural decolonisation processes and Cold War ideologies, Cuban music was deemed both modern and able to offer a musical alternative to the Western music dance styles. It also accompanied a cosmopolitan lifestyle and social behaviour that appealed to the African urban youth. Looking at Senegal, Richard Shain writes that "Cuban music provided a progressive alternative to both traditional African music and the hegemonic culture of the colonizers," therefore "enacting an alternative modernity to the Europeanized models so prevalent in post-war Senegal." [7]

Besides, Cuban music was not considered foreign but rather as a genre returning home after centuries of slave trade and colonisation, a phenomenon Shain labels "roots in reverse." In this regard, Cuban music was ready to be included in the nationalist ideologies of the independence era. Bob White points out that "the success of Afro-Cuban music was due in part to this structural ambiguity, which made it possible to function as a torch of authenticity for some and as a marker of cosmopolitan modernity for others." [8] Cuban sounds and instruments were easily/quickly incorporated into the repertoires played by national "modern orchestras" that flourished all over the continent. For the newly independent African

countries where strong cultural policies were established to support the nation-building process, “traditional” and local music dance practices were often promoted simultaneously with Cuban music, understood as a marker of cosmopolitan modernity they aspired to.



Orchestre National A, Mali

Source: radioafrica.com

From Mali to Cuba: Las Maravillas de Mali in Havana

As part of the cultural convention signed between Cuba and Mali in 1964, ten Malian students received scholarships to receive music training in Havana. The ambition of the Malian state was also to constitute a corps of professionals to staff the nascent artistic institutions. The young Malians spent about ten years in Havana, from the mid-1960s to the beginning of the 1970s, studying music at the Conservatorio Alejandro García Caturla after having learned Spanish. In parallel to their studies at the Conservatorio, they created a band called Las Maravillas de Mali in 1965 and recorded a disc at EGREM studio in 1967. [9] Their music met with success in Cuba and in Africa, and their most famous song is certainly *Rendez-vous chez Fatimata*.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0a-5zwyT2dc&list=RD0a-5zwyT2dc&start_radio=1

Chez Fatimata, Maravillas de Mali, 1967

Source: YouTube



Cover, *Las Maravillas de Mali, Les Merveilles du Mali*, EGREM, Areito, Cuba, LDA-3344, 1967

Las Maravillas de Mali's eponymous album shows that they adopted the format of the *charanga* (an orchestra mainly composed of a piano, a violin, a flute, double bass and percussions) to play different kinds of Cuban music, from *guajira* to *bolero* via *danzón* and *chachachá*. The famous Cuban Orquesta Aragón, whose music was already very popular in Africa, was a major influence on their musical style. It therefore inspired the creation of the Malian *charanga* in Havana. Aragón's musicians advised their Malian counterparts in the ways of playing Cuban music during their studies. [10] Beyond the musical interactions, the two orchestras also fostered personal relationships that were to last on both sides of the Atlantic over several decades.

Despite Orquesta Aragón's influence on Maravillas de Mali's album, the Malian musicians managed to africanise or even "malianise" their music with the themes addressed in the songs as well as the languages they used: they sung not only in Spanish but also in French and Bambara (*bamanan kan*), the Malian national language. For instance, *Rendez-vous chez Fatimata*, sung in French, evokes the nightlife of the urban African youth; *Soubalé* recounts episodes of the epic of Sunjata Keïta, the founder of the Empire of Mali in the 13^th^ century; *Lumumba* celebrates Patrice Lumumba's fight for the independence of Congo from Belgium rule; *Africa Mia*, in Spanish, is a pan-Africanist ode that reflects the intellectual currents of thoughts of the independence era. Moreover, the lyrics of the latter are particularly telling, although in a subtle way, of the encounter with the Cubans as experienced by the Malian musicians:

> *África*
> *África mía*
> *Que bella te sueño*
> *Tierra de ensueño*
> *Y melancolía*
> *África mía*

> *Tu embrujo sentimental*
> *Tu nombre es mi ideal*
> *Yo soy africano*
> *No tengo rival*
> *Y tengo mi hermano que me trata igual /*
> *Y tengo mi hermano si me trata igual*

> *¡Oye mi hermano, trátame igual!*
> *Sí, sí, sí, me trata igual (x3)*

> *Africa*
> *My Africa*
> *How beautiful I dream you*
> *Land of dreams*
> *And melancholy*
> *My Africa*

> *Your sentimental spell*
> *Your name is my ideal*
> *I am African*
> *I have no rival*
> *And I have my brother who treats me the same /*
> *And I have my brother if he treats me the same*

> *Hey my brother, treat me the same!*
> *Yes yes yes, he treats me the same (x3)*

Very interestingly the lyrics show the musicians claiming their Africanity from Cuba, and their love for Africa by singing in Spanish ("*Yo soy africano*"). At the same time, they also explain how they met their alter ego on the island. The idea of a transatlantic brotherhood ("And I have my brother who treats me the same") shared between Malians and Cubans echoes the political discourses of the time regarding both

Pan-Africanism and Cuban internationalism towards Africa. It also implicitly relates to the history of the transatlantic slave trade with lyrics referring to Africa as both a "land of dreams and melancholia," that is a source of longing and suffering at once. When the singer declares "I am African/I have no rival," he seems to assert his authenticity as compared to his Cuban "brothers." Yet at the same time, there is a search for validation when he requests to be treated as an equal ("Hey my brother, treat me the same!") to which the chorus repeats assertively that he is indeed treated as such ("Yes yes yes, he treats me the same"). These lyrics are therefore particularly striking in the way they convey the emotions felt by the Malians who both yearned for Africa at the same time as they met their Cuban counterparts on the island. The latter could well become their "brothers" yet only if they speak to each other in equal terms: "And I have my brother if he treats me the same." Later on, other generations of Malian students kept benefitting from these cultural exchange programmes. One of the members of Las Maravillas, percussionist Bah Tapo, even came back to Cuba to obtain his Ph.D. in musicology in 1989. In the introduction to his dissertation written in Spanish about *koteba*, a Malian performance genre, the author acknowledged the preponderant role played by both Cuba and Mali in his academic achievements. His graduation made him, he wrote, "the first musicologist of [his] country and the first African to be trained in this speciality by Cuba," which constituted for him "a great historical responsibility." [11] Bah Tapo therein expressed a sense of duty and national pride shared with the Malian musicians sent to Cuba in the aftermath of Mali's independence to serve the cultural diplomacy policies linking the two countries.

The disillusionment was all the more patent/acute? upon their return to Mali at the beginning of the 1970s. Modibo Keïta's government had been overthrown by a military coup led by General Moussa Traoré in 1968. The cultural priorities defined by the deposed government were suspended and the state-sponsored artistic ensembles and festivals were temporarily dismantled. As a consequence, the now well-trained musicians did not find a favourable political situation and they either integrated the national orchestra or left the country.

This was the case for Boncana Maïga, Maravillas' leader, who settled in Ivory Coast. In Abidjan, he continued to play an important role in the development of an African *salsa*, not least as one of the founder members of *Africando*, a "Pan-African orchestra" created in 1992 by Maïga and Guinean producer Ibrahima Sylla. [12] Nevertheless, the chaotic return of Las Maravillas did not darken the bright vitality of Cuban music that continued to inspire the greatest Malian orchestras of the 1970s such as the Rail Band du Buffet de la Gare de Bamako, Les Ambassadeurs du Motel, Super Biton de Ségou, or Kanaga de Mopti.

From Cuba to Africa: Orquestra Aragón's tours

Although Orquestra Aragón was certainly the most famous Cuban orchestra in the 1960s Africa, it is only in the 1970s that the band started touring on the continent. Tanzania and Zanzibar welcomed Orquesta Aragón's first steps on the continent in December 1971. The band then toured in Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, Mali and Algeria in January 1972 before spending another three months the following year in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Mali. In 1977 a new tour took the orchestra to Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Mali, Benin, Congo-Brazzaville and Angola; and to Ivory Coast and Guinea in 1979. [13] Among these African tours of the 1970s, Mali appears then as one of the most visited countries by Orquesta Aragón.

Many newspapers in Africa and Cuba recounted the success of their concerts in West Africa. Besides the popularity of the orchestra, the newspapers also mentioned the political framework within which these tours were organised, therein acknowledging the diplomatic links based on socialist camaraderie. For instance, upon the visit to Benin by Orquesta Aragón in 1977, a Beninese journalist noted how much >"the

head of state did thereafter underline the profound meaning of the visit by the Cuban orchestra in the Popular Republic of Benin. A visit that is indeed inscribed in the frame of the reinforcement of the friendship and solidarity links between the Cuban and Beninese revolutions." [14]

In another news item, the journalist Mensah Ekué commented on the success of the Cuban orchestra whose songs "remind one so much our local rhythms." [15]

On the occasion of Orquesta Aragón's concert in Cotonou, Benin's president Mathieu Kérékou pronounced a speech on 3 November 1977. Kérékou strengthened diplomatic relationships with Cuba as the new government adopted a Marxist-Leninist political orientation when he took over the previous regime by a military coup on 26 October 1972. Dahomey became the Popular Republic of Benin in 1975. While expressing his admiration for Fidel Castro's communist revolution, Kérékou also mentioned how he felt that the Cuban musicians were coming to their home in Africa: "Our comrades come from afar, their young representative well said that they were born in Africa and coming back home." [16]

These excerpts show how much the sense of musical familiarity as well as the acknowledgement of socialist political orientations renewed the shared transatlantic history between Cuba and Benin marked by the experience of slave trade and colonisation. These instances of a transatlantic cultural diplomacy programme actually enacted "a South-South dialogue that buil[t] on historical connections yet also establishe[d] new resonances in musical evocations of Atlantic affinities." [17]

In terms of musical creativity, Orquesta Aragón's members benefited from this encounter with African music on the continent itself. It is said for instance that cellist Alejandro Tomás Valdés created the *chaonda* rhythm after their visit to Guinea. The term *chaonda* is constituted of *cha* to refer to *chachachá* and *onda* (wave) to signal that this rhythm announced a "new wave" (*onda nueva*). It is even reported that President of Guinea Sekou Touré requested this creative exploration from Aragón's director Rafaël Lay. [18] In an album recorded at EGREM studios in 1976, Aragón released two songs to promote this new rhythm. [19] When Aragón toured Guinea again in 1977 after their visit of 1973, the musicians presented it to the audience. They obtained much success, at such a point that this Cuban take on a local rhythm was officially awarded a prize.

The example of the creation of the *chaonda* rhythm inspired by Aragón's stay in Guinea shows how the political context favoured not only the realisation of reciprocal diplomatic exchanges but also nourished the orchestra's musical creativity. A new layer of influences coming from the African continent therefore again transformed the already creolised Cuban music played by Orquesta Aragón. Since the *chaonda* rhythm entered Orquesta Aragón's repertoire in the late 1970s, it inspired many other songs created thereafter and the lyrics always mention the African source of inspiration it drew from. For instance, the lyrics of the song *A bailar mi chaonda* recorded by Aragón in their 2001 album *En Route* say:

> *¡Chaonda!*
> *Oye lo bien*
> *Llegó el chaonda*
> *De pura esencia Africana y música cubana*
> *Es el legado de un ritmo fuerte*
> *Que ha recorrido cuatro continentes*
> *Y fue creado*
> *Por Alejandro Tomás Valdés*

> *Chaonda!*
> *Hey good*
> *The chaonda arrived*
> *Of pure African essence and Cuban music*
> *It is the legacy of a strong rhythm*
> *That has travelled four continents*
> *And it was created*
> *By Alejandro Tomás Valdés*

VIDEO
View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5UrSMuCOno

A Bailar Mi Cha Onda, Orquesta Aragón, The Lusafrica Years, ℗ 2009 Lusafrica
Source: YouTube

Not only do the lyrics recall the origin and creation of the rhythm, but also its fortune. *Chaonda* is presented as the creative product of an encounter between African and Cuba music – "Of pure African essence and Cuban music" – yet mediated by Alejandro Tomás Valdés. This encounter replicates musical encounters of the past, born of the transatlantic slave trade. However, the creation of *chaonda* is now directly connected to contemporary Africa, with Aragón's musicians rediscovering empirically this Guinean rhythm that inspired them. Interestingly, the song also mentions the success of this style which "has travelled four continents," following Aragón's tours over the world.

These different strata of "African essence and Cuban music" represent several layers and movements of Africanization, Cubanization and re-Africanization. The combination of these musical elements and their creative results are thus to be apprehended in a continuum of several back and forth journeys that fertilise one another as they crisscross the Atlantic according to a process of "cross-fertilization." [20]

Roots, Belonging and Diasporic Intimacy

Accounts by Orquesta Aragón's and Las Maravillas de Mali's members, as well as their respective song lyrics about their experiences in Africa for the former, in Cuba for the latter emphasise a shared sentiment of feeling "at home" here and there. For instance, here is how Rafael Bacallao, Orquesta Aragón's singer and dancer, expressed his surprise to discover the dancing abilities of young women in Africa:

> *"All Africa enjoys very much Orquesta Aragón, enjoys Cuban rhythm. I was quite popular there (in Africa) and I cannot say where I feel better, because I am honoured in all places. You know that our folklore comes from African roots. You find a girl in Africa, invite her to dance and the steps are exactly the same as a young girl from here. You feel like you're dancing with a Cuban for a little while. They have fantastic rhythmic power. They play a sound similar to ours."* [26]

The expression of a musical, rhythmical, and kinetic familiarity embodies a sense of "diasporic intimacy that has been a marked feature of transnational black Atlantic creativity." [21] The history of these political exchanges was embodied and brought by individuals who fully engaged with the music involved, as they

developed deep emotional connections to the land that welcomed them. Malian percussionist Bah Tapo wrote a short poem to close the acknowledgements of his Ph.D. thesis, which he dedicated to his "adoptive Cuban parents." [22]

> *A Cuba le digo*
> *Que mi tierra me llama:*
> *Tengo que partir.*
> *Me siento cubano,*
> *Lo llevo en mi sueño*
> *Y es todo un tormento*
> *Para mí,*
> *Fuera de ella vivir.*

> *To Cuba I say*
> *That my land is calling me:*
> *I have to leave.*
> *I feel Cuban,*
> *I carry it in my dreams*
> *And this is a real torment*
> *For me*
> *To live away from it.*

The poem emphasises how torn the musician feels between a sense of his duty to come back to Mali and his emotional link to Cuba. This rather lyrical account shows how much the Cold War political agenda translated into cultural policy was not only symbolical but also embodied, to the extent of affecting the musicians intimately.

Moreover, not only did this feeling of being "at home" rely on the musical familiarity felt on both sides but also on the acknowledgement of a shared history marked by the experience of slave trade and colonialism. Boncana Maïga thus explained:

> *"We were lucky to have the Cuban musicians with us all the time, all the time… Because we were the first Blacks in Cuba and Cubans wanted to approach Blacks in order to learn their own history actually. They are in Cuba, they are told that they came from slave descent and so on, but there you go, the authentic ones are here, they were born in Africa."* [27]

In this excerpt, Maïga positions himself as an "authentic" Black African whose contact could offer the Cuban musicians he encountered the possibility to reconnect to their history. From this perspective, historical traumas were thus re-embodied through the journey of the Malian musicians going to Cuba, somehow mirroring the initial forced displacement through the Middle Passage. Yet in the political context of the 1960s, the Malian students were sent to Havana to receive musical training. This process testifies to the popularity of Cuban music in Africa at that time, and it offers an alternative narrative against the predominant interpretations emphasising African influences of Cuban music.

Going back to Mathieu Kérékou's discourse of 1977 when he greeted Orquesta Aragón's members as "children of Africa" coming back to their home and birthplace, another layer of space-time conflation is performed. This entanglement of space and time is at the core of thedialectic of the return in the realm of diaspora experience. As James Clifford puts it:

> *"In diaspora experience, the co-presence of "here" and "there" is articulated with an antiteleological (sometimes messianic) temporality. Linear history is broken, the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed, future: a renewed, painful yearning. For black Atlantic diaspora consciousness, the recurring break where time stops and restarts is the Middle Passage."* [28]

Different historical phases of circulations across the Black Atlantic are therein reimagined and even compressed into an elusive temporality. The interwoven feelings of the persons who have experienced these crossings further complicate and challenge assumptions about notions such as "sources," "roots," "belonging" and identity formation issues. Identified by Richard Shain in terms of "roots in reverse," the complex phenomenon of *allers-retours* brings into relief the paradoxical fluidity of the notion of roots, as they are displaced from one side of the Atlantic to the other according to various interlocutors. This is what Ariana Hernandez-Reguant points to when she notices that world music producers "took contemporary African music as a starting point, tracing a genealogy back to Cuba as its source." [23] The intertwined musical journeys of Las Maravillas de Mali in Cuba and the Orquesta Aragón's tours in West Africa demonstrate the elusive malleability of both "roots" and "routes," challenging Clifford's assumption that "roots always precede routes." [24] Indeed, in that very case, it seems that it can be otherwise considered that routes reactive, displace or even reinvent roots.

Whether it be through the musical and political exchanges that occurred between Cuba and Africa during the Cold War or later through the world music networks, the multidirectional circulations, the interplay of influences and the corollary cross-fertilization between Cuban and African music clearly reverse and challenge long-settled musical genealogies and discourses. At the same time, the related narratives reactivate and legitimise the historical links between Africa and the Caribbean. Yet reversing the expected senses of circulation of cultural flows across the Black Atlantic complicates the apprehension of where the homeland stands despite the diplomatic missions the musicians were invested with.

Conclusion

During the Cold War and while African countries were becoming independent, the postcolonial alliances fostered between socialist countries implied the bypassing of former imperial hegemonies by the creation of new South-South trajectories. The creation of these routes contributed to strengthen the constant musical circulations back and forth across the Atlantic. Both African and Cuban musical creativity benefited from these exchanges throughout the postcolonial Atlantic. Furthermore, these political exchanges underlined the development of artistic careers of cosmopolitan musicians. In addition to offering an alternative modernity, the appropriation of Cuban music in Africa was able to reactivate historical transatlantic links between Africa and the Caribbean, therefore pertaining to the wider intellectual framework of the independence era.

The creation of the band Las Maravillas de Mali by young Malians sent to Cuba to receive music training in the 1960s, and the tours in Africa by the famous Cuban band Orquesta Aragón beginning in the 1970s, personified these transatlantic diplomatic exchanges. The personal accounts from both orchestras' members shed light on the ways political measures did rely on singular individuals who deeply and emotionally engaged with the music and its related values at an intimate level. These embodied journeys materialized the political framework that crafted those musical exchanges during the Cold War. Along the way, however, this process challenged notions of roots and belonging in a political context otherwise saturated by competing nationalist ideologies.

Interestingly enough, the musical exchanges initiated during the Cold War seem to have heralded current artistic collaborations that are henceforth developed within different frameworks. Whether they have been shaped by the socialist diplomatic interplay caused? by the fall of the Berlin Wall or by current World music networks, many contemporary musical productions continue to draw on the Cuba-Mali connections. For instance, the release of the album *Afrocubism* by World Circuit label in 2010 featured famous Cuban and Malian musicians. This project happened to be the long-awaited realisation of an encounter that should have taken place 15 years earlier at the initiative of music producer Nick Gold. The initial project was to create an album with Cuban and Malian musicians, but the latter did not get their visas on time. As a result, the album featured only the Cuban musicians. This accident eventually produced *Buena Vista Social Club* (1997), one of the most successful World music productions in history.



Cover, *AfroCubism*, 2010

Source: World Circuit production

If musical encounters between Cuban and African musicians have now become part of the global imagination, they have a long, multifaceted and multi-layered history that also pertains to a continuous Afro-Atlantic dialogue. The convergence of different strata of musical circulations, political relationships

and individual trajectories reveals the complex history of a transatlantic musical globalisation as well as the role of particular political dynamics in the postcolonial world to shape new music and identities. Interestingly, the group Las Maravillas de Mali reformed in 2019 with the last surviving member Boncana Maïga and a mix of African and Cuban musicians. Maïga went back to Havana and released a new version of Maravillas's famous song *Chez Fatimata*. Yet this time, in the music video that promoted the song on social networks, Fatimata is a young Cuban dancer and Havana provided the setting. Wheels within wheels, in everlasting transatlantic musical dialogues.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEMNC-kzwQU

> Rendez-vous chez Fatimata ft. Mory Kanté, Maravillas de Mali, Heavy Surf, 2018, Decca Records France
>
> **Source:** YouTube

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clifford, James. *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1993.

White, Bob W. "Congolese Rumba and Other Cosmopolitanisms." *Cahiers d'études Africaines* 42, no. 168 (January 1, 2002): 663–86. https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafricaines.161.

Von Eschen, Penny M. *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*. Harvard University Press, 2006.

Nye, Joseph S. *Power in the Global Information Age*. Taylor & Francis, 2004.

Shain, Richard M. "Roots in Reverse: Cubanismo in Twentieth-Century Senegalese Music." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, no. 1 (2002): 83–101. https://doi.org/10.2307/3097367.

Moehn, Frederick. "New Dialogues, Old Routes: Emergent Collaborations between Brazilian and Angolan Music Makers." *Popular Music* 30, no. 2 (2011): 175–90. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143011000018.

Matory, J. Lorand. "Afro-Atlantic Culture: On the Live Dialogue between Africa and the Americas." In *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, edited by Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, 93–103. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999.

Martin, Denis-Constant. "The Musical Heritage of Slavery: From Creolization to 'World Music.'" In *Music and Globalization: Critical Encounters*, edited by Bob W. White, 17–39. Tracking Globalization. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.

Marrero Pérez de Urría, Gaspar. *La orquesta Aragón*. Segunda edición. Colección Cinquillo. La Habana: Editorial José Martí, 2008.

Hernandez-Reguant, Ariana. "World Music Producers and the Cuban Frontier." In *Music and Globalization: Critical Encounters*, edited by Bob W. White, 111–33. Tracking Globalization. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.

Marès, Antoine, and Anaïs Fléchet. "Introduction." *Relations internationales* 155, no. 3 (2013): 3–9. https://doi.org/10.3917/ri.155.0003.

Fosler-Lussier, Danielle. *Music in America's Cold War diplomacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.

Dorsch, Hauke. "Black or Red Atlantic? — Mozambican Students in Cuba and Their Reintegration at Home." *Zeitschrift Für Ethnologie* 136, no. 2 (2011): 289–309.

Dorsch, Hauke. "'Indépendance Cha Cha': African Pop Music since the Independence Era." *Africa Spectrum* 45, no. 3 (2010): 131–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971004500307.

Djebbari, Élina. "Guerre froide, jeux politiques et circulations musicales entre Cuba et l'Afrique de l'Ouest. Las Maravillas de Mali à Cuba et la Orquesta Aragón en Afrique." *Afrique contemporaine* 254, no. 2 (2015): 21–36. https://doi.org/10.3917/afco.254.0021.

Davenport, Lisa E. *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era*. American Made Music Series. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

NOTES

1 The research presented here was supported by the ERC-funded project Modern Moves led by Ananya Kabir at King's College London. All translations from French and Spanish to English are by the author.

2 Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (MINREX), *Convenios culturales suscritos por Cuba 1959–197*5 (Havana: Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Dirección Jurídica, 1975).

3 MINREX, *Convenios culturales*, s.p.

4 Lisa E. Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 148.

5 Fidel Castro, "We are united by blood," in *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia*, ed. David Deutschmann (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1989), 61–64; Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro, *How Far We Slaves Have Come! South Africa and Cuba in Today's World* (New York: Pathfinder, 1991).

6 Hauke Dorsch, "Black or Red Atlantic?– Mozambican Students in Cuba and their Reintegration at Home," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 136, no. 2 (2011): 295.

7 Richard M. Shain, "Roots in Reverse: *Cubanismo* in Twentieth Century Senegalese Music," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, no.1 (2002): 91, 84.

8 Bob W. White, "Congolese Rumba and Other Cosmopolitanisms," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 4, no.168 (2002): 668.

9 EGREM: Empresa de grabaciones y ediciones musicales [musical recording and publishing company]. Located in Havana, EGREM studios are Cuba's national recording institution. The information given here appears on the cover (verso) of *Las Maravillas de Mali*'s record (*Las Maravillas de Mali,* Les Merveilles du Mali, EGREM, Areito, Cuba, LDA-3344, 1967). José Loyola Fernández, *La charanga y sus maravillas: Orquesta Aragón* (Barranquilla: Fondo Editorial del Caribe, 2013).

10 José Loyola Fernández, *La charanga y sus maravillas: Orquesta Aragón* (Barranquilla: Fondo Editorial del Caribe, 2013), 362.

11 Bah Tapo, *El Kotebá: Complejo Cultural de la Etnia Bamanán o Bambará en la Republica de Mali*. PhD diss., Instituto Superior de Arte, 1989, n.p.

12 Interview with Boncana Maïga, Cotonou, February 21, 2015.

13 Gaspard Marrero, *La Orquesta Aragón* (Havana: Editorial José Marti, 2008), 243-6.

14 Excerpt from a Beninese news item entitled "Fin du séjour en république populaire du Bénin de l'orchestre Aragón de Cuba" featured in Ilse Bulit, "Aragón: un visa para Africa," *Bohemia* 69, no. 52, December 30, 1977, 5.

15 Mensah Ekué, "L'international Aragon Orchestra au Bénin. Des maîtres incontestables de la musique afro-cubaine," *Ehuzu*, October 25, 1977, 3.

16 Original quote: "*Estos compañeros vienen de muy lejos, el joven representante de ellos bien decía, que ellos habían nacido de África y que volvían a ella*." Archives of the Ministry of foreign affairs, Havana, Cuba, box Benin, decada 1970–1983, ordinario 1.

17 Frederick Moehn, "New dialogues, old routes: emergent collaborations between Brazilian and Angolan music makers," *Popular Music* 30, no. 2 (2011): 175.

18 Ilse Bulit, "Debuto la Orquesta Aragón en el Palacio del pueblo de Conakry ante tres mil espectadores", *Granma*, October 1, 1977.

19 *Orquesta Aragón*, Areito, LD 3600, 1976, 33rpm LP.

20 Denis-Constant Martin, “The Musical Heritage of Slavery: From Creolization to ‘World Music,’ ” in *Music and Globalization. Critical Encounters*, ed. Bob White (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 26.

21 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 16.

22 Tapo, *El Kotebá*, n.p.

23 Ariana Hernandez-Reguant, “World Music Producers and the Cuban Frontier,” in *Music and Globalization*, 117.

24 Clifford, *Routes*, 3.

25 *1° Congreso nacional de cultura, Guía para la discusión del proyecto del plan de cultura para 1963 con los organismos de masa*, 1962, p. 20. National Archives, Havana, Fondo Especial, caja 1, n° 169.

26 Quoted in Marrero, *La Orquesta Aragón*, 142.

27 Interview with the author, Cotonou, February 21, 2015.

28 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 264.