

“¡Soy Mexicano ahora!”, said Orlando as he sat with a cigarette in his hand, telling me about what it is like for him living in Mexico. We sat together in Orlando’s living room in *Los Heroes de Tecámac*, just about an hour from the Center of Mexico City. His walls are chipping and some of the furnishings are sub-par, left behind from the last tenant. This neighborhood houses many of the lower-working class that keep the metropolis afloat. This is a huge improvement from his last residence in Ecatepec de Morelos—known to be one of the most dangerous areas in all of Mexico.

For Orlando, even Ecatepec was an improvement from living in Cuba. “*Por lo menos hay comida*” (at least there is food). For him dealing with murderers and thieves was just another price to pay in order to eat well every day and buy *combos* (food remittances) for his family in Cuba. Unlike Mexico, Cuba has virtually no guns and is extremely safe, even in the poorest of areas.

He is coming into his third year living in Mexico where he stayed behind illegally while on tour with a Cuban folkloric troupe. Musicians in Cuba have the possibility to travel outside of Cuba on sponsored international tours. This, in turn, gives them a chance to emigrate and make money for remittances. We laugh as Orlando, a dark-skinned Cuban man recited local Mexican slang terms, celebrating his recent accomplishment of attaining Mexican permanent residency. In a humorous irony, Orlando celebrated his Mexican residency mainly because it means he can now make trips back to Cuba and see his family.

In Mexico City, just as in Matanzas, Cuba, Orlando makes his living as a ritual musician playing Cuban *batá* drums in Santería ceremonies. This musical tradition was brought to Cuba by Yoruba Slaves during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and has survived through oral transmission. Orlando is among the few master students of the late Esteban “Chachá” Bacallao Vega, a prolific drummer from Matanzas, Cuba. As a child and adolescent, Orlando learned the sacred musical traditions and went on to become one of the foremost experts on these musical forms. Despite having built a career in a field that is virtually tied to Matanzas, Cuba, his body of knowledge and virtuosity of performance has given him a source of livelihood in Mexico City.

In an interesting turn of events, localized knowledge and traditions from Cuba are contributing to international religious economies in Mexico City. The cosmopolis that is Mexico City brings Mexicans, Argentines, Venezuelans, and other nationalities together to worship Afro-Cuban deities. This, in turn, provides the economy to sustain musicians like Orlando. These conditions appear to be stable, if not flourishing, allowing for Orlando and countless other musicians, to provide for their families back in Cuba. The large amount of specialized repertoire necessary to work as a ritual musician means that those with the most knowledge and experience are given first call for religious ceremonies.

Orlando, or *el Yamba* how he is commonly referred to by his colleagues, works five to seven days a week. Typically, he will play one to two ceremonies on a given workday. While work is certainly booming and Orlando expresses joy at the novelty of being in a new country,

things also get hard. He misses his neighborhood in Cuba. His mom. His friends. His religious family. He misses a good domino game outside of his home, drinking whiskey with his friends. He misses black people. “Mi color no sirve aquí” (my color doesn’t do me well). Back there he lived where his forefathers are buried and walks the land that gave the musical traditions he so feverously defends. In Matanzas, he did not have to worry about gangs, police extortion, or the anti-black racism that is commonplace for him now. Sadly, for him, his neighborhood is but a shell of what it was when he left with so many having fled in search of food and opportunity.

Nowadays, Orlando keeps his head down in the street and dedicates himself to his work as a religious musician. He has found a plethora of new friends, many of whom are also Cuban migrants working in the same religious economy of Santería in Mexico. He keeps in touch with his neighborhood friends via WhatsApp and does group video calls to connect with friends across continents and archipelagos.

Orlando and other Cuban ritual musicians have carved a niche for themselves, one that allows them to live well in Mexico and provide for their family back home. This stands in staunch contrast to immigration of Cuban ritual musicians in the United States where there are no appreciation and no economy to sustain this type of labor. In many ways, Mexico has provided an alternative to the US as a place to pursue a better life for Cubans and that trend seems to be continuing. And while living in Mexico has offered much need relief and money to Orlando and his family, I, along with many of the Cubans I work with, still hope for the day that life in Cuba will flourish again.