



DEEP RHYTHMIC STRUCTURES IN THE AFRICAN CONTINUUM

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For several decades, scholars have noted a continuity of musical structures in African and African Diasporic music. However, description of this continuity has not moved much beyond a fairly obvious list of musical characteristics: 3 v. 2 polyrhythms, fixed ostinati supporting variable lead parts, the close link of music and language, and so forth. Also, more focused studies have largely examined just a few cultures: those of the Ewe (Ghana), Yoruba, and Cuba, and to a lesser extent Brazil and Haiti. These particular cultures have been readily accessible to U.S. and European researchers, and expert musicians from those cultures have been more active in the U.S. and Europe. As a result, analysis often proceeds from what has become an implicit bias towards West African/Cuban rhythmic models.

This paper aims towards a better comparative approach, one that is both broader geographically and more accurate musically. It presents perspectives from Martinique, a French *département* in the Eastern Caribbean. Certain aspects of Martinican rhythms differ from the West African/Cuban model, yet can be seen as variations of the same underlying structures. The main body of the paper is a selection of examples illustrating this point.

The examples focus on *tibwa*, a guiding rhythmic pattern that infuses Martinican music. At first glance, *tibwa* appears to fit what Samuel Floyd calls the circum-Caribbean “cinquillo-tresillo complex,” with exact parallels in Cuban, Puerto Rican, and other musics. But Martinican musicians use *tibwa* in ways that depart markedly from elsewhere in the Caribbean. First, Hispanic Caribbean dancers relate to cinquillo-tresillo in a fairly consistent way, which moreover corresponds to West African traditions. But in Martinique the relationship of movement to *tibwa* is shifted. The underlying model of dance-music connection needs to be expanded to take this into account. Second, by West African/Cuban standards Martinican songs consistently violate the West African/Cuban sense of orienting melody to rhythm. (In Hispanic Caribbean terms, Martinican songs do not “follow clave.”) Of course, by Martinican standards there is no violation; again, the model needs to be expanded. Third, the cinquillo/tresillo concept can be extended into the realm of 12-pulse ternary rhythms. Here too, Martinican usage differs from other islands. My three examples address some major themes in African and Diasporic music analysis: the relationship of music and dance; orientation, or the organization of music by a timeline (usually played on bell or clave) with distinct rhythmic characteristics; and the parallel structure of binary (2/4, 4/4) and ternary (6/8, 12/8) time. In each case, by

examining how Martinican music differs from others, I aim to deepen and clarify the overall picture of African/Diasporic music's continuity.