

Dialogue in the Diaspora: Benin and Brazil in Conversation  
Jacaré Brazil with special guests Jomion and the Uklos of Benin  
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How Are the Musical Histories of Benin and Brazil Connected?  
Sarah Politz

Our virtual collaboration with Jomion and the Uklos seeks to serve as a reflection on the complex shared histories of migration and identity formations between Benin and Brazil through dialogue, music, and opportunities for increasing mutual understanding. For centuries, Africans and their descendants have communicated important messages through rhythm across space and time in the Atlantic world, and this is certainly true in the cases of Brazil and Benin. These messages have traveled in both directions across the ocean with the slave trade and the returns of freed slaves to the African continent, creating a busy trans-Atlantic conversation that crosses historical eras. These messages have been crucial to the survival of African-descended people and their cultures in the world, coded messages that say implicitly, through rhythm and song, “we are together,” “we hear you,” “there is danger here,” “we will offer you protection,” and “it is time to move.”

The African roots of music in Brazil are generally understood to come from the forced migration of people from at least two major parts of the African continent: first people of the Bantu-family cultures of present-day Angola, Congo, and Mozambique, which are believed to be a major source of Rio de Janeiro’s famous *samba* rhythms. Samba takes on different regional characters across Brazil depending on which cultures influenced it most strongly in that particular place (Clerfeuille 2007). For example, there is a strong regional samba culture located in Bahia that differs from that in Rio. Samba has been part of a complex and political story about race and identity in Brazil since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hertzman 2013:146-168).

The second major area of African influence on Brazilian music comes from the Yoruba (Nago) and Fon people of present-day Benin and Nigeria, whose religious, dance, and musical *vodun* and *orisa* practices have had deep influences on analogous practices in Brazil, particularly in the Afro-Brazilian center of Bahia (Reis and Mamigonian 2005). In Bahia, the majority of the enslaved people who arrived during the slave trade's latest years were from Yoruba and Fon cultures, since traders based in Brazil and Cuba continued to defy the British's ban on slave trading in 1810 (Crook 1993:92). The practice of dance, music, and religion known as *candomblé* combines aspects of Bantu-Angolan, Yoruba, Portuguese Catholicism, and indigenous South American cultures (Clerfeuille 2007). The ethnically Fon people (known as Jeje in Brazil) who arrived in Bahia came from a number of Gbe-family language-speaking ethnic groups that correspond to kingdoms and cities in Benin, such as Dahomey (Daome), Ardra (Allada), Mahi, or Savalu. The Yoruba people who arrived in Brazil were also ethnically diverse ("Yoruba" is an exonym applied to people from southern Nigeria by the Hausa), and they only came to create a unified Brazilian "Nago" identity as time went on (Reis and Mamigonian 2005:81).

Importantly for history and for our musical collaboration, the exchange between Benin and Brazil did not move in just one direction. A massive slave revolt in Bahia in 1835 sent the first wave of freed slaves from Brazil back to West African coastal cities in Porto Novo and Ouidah in Benin, and Lagos, Nigeria. When slavery was abolished in Brazil and Cuba in 1885, more ex-slaves returned to those port cities, setting communities of so-called "Brazilians," or *brasiliens*. These communities were often educated, practicing Catholics whose cultural identities, religion, and music were made up of a blend of several African cultures as well as influences from Portuguese and Spanish culture. They brought with them a 19<sup>th</sup> century version

of the Brazilian *samba*, transformed from its Central African roots via contact with European cultures and the process of Atlantic migration into something that captured what it was to be African and diasporic at the same time (de Athayde 2017). These communities of Brazilian returnees, known as the “Agudas” in Benin, quickly became powerful traders and politicians during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Beninese musicians like Angelique Kidjo and Lionel Loueke count Brazilian returnees among their ancestors.

#### Further Reading

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