

# CULT MUSIC OF TRINIDAD

Recorded in Trinidad by George Eaton Simpson

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CULT MUSIC OF TRINIDAD / FOLKWAYS FE 4478

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# CULT MUSIC OF TRINIDAD

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

# Cult Music of Trinidad

Recorded in Trinidad by GEORGE EATON SIMPSON

## \*TRINIDADIAN CULT MUSIC

Introduction and Notes by

George Eaton Simpson, Oberlin College

Trinidad was discovered by Columbus in 1498, but in 1783 less than three thousand persons occupied the island. In the latter year, Spain opened Trinidad to settlement by non-Spanish immigrants, and the population grew to 17,718 by 1797, the year the British took over the island. Between 1783 and 1797, a considerable number of French colonists migrated to Trinidad from Grenada, St. Vincent, the French islands, France and Canada. In 1797, the population consisted of: 2,151 whites; 4,476 free colored; 10,000 slaves; and 1,082 Indians. Following the abolition of slavery in 1838, indentured workers from India were brought to the island, mainly as laborers on the sugar estates in the South. By 1946, Trinidad's population had increased to 557,970 in the following proportions: Whites, 2.74 per cent; African descent, 46.88; East Indian, 35.09; Mixed and colored descent, 14.12; Chinese 1.01; and Syrian, 0.16. Estimates for 1960 indicate a population of 825,700, nearly 45 per cent of which is East Indian. Today only a few hundred Trinidadians are of Amerindian descent, and many of these are of mixed origin.

### Shango

The Shango cult in Trinidad is the equivalent of vodun in Haiti, candomble and macumba in Brazil, santeria in Cuba, and cumina in Jamaica. Its devotees are lower-class rural and urban Trinidadians of African descent whose religious and magical practices are derived from the Yoruba traditions of southwestern Nigeria and from Catholicism.

The basic establishment of a Shango (also called orisha, Yoruba, or African) cult consists of (a) a shrine area where five to ten "stools" for the most important "powers" of the center are located; (b) a "chappelle" or small cult house; and (c) the "palais" or "tent" where ceremonies are held and some healing is done. A "stool" is an earthen or concrete mound, usually from six to eighteen inches high, on which are placed candles, a clay pot of water, a flag, and one or more of the god's "implements". The chapelle houses statues and lithographs of the saints, cruxifixes, rosaries, candles, "thunder stones," vases of flowers, pots of water, bottles of olive oil, and such "tools" of the powers as swords, double-bladed wooden axes, cutlasses, hatchets, daggers, wooden guns, wooden spears, bows and arrows, anchors, boat paddles, drums,

keys, banners, wooden crosses, brooms, and shepherd's crooks. The "palais" is a partially closed-in structure with a corrugated iron or thatched roof and an earthen floor, equipped with benches along the four sides. At a large Shango center, one finds also a cook-house where food is prepared in an enormous oven for the participants in the annual ceremonies.

Although the typical Shango center is leader-dominated, the drummers and the "dancers" (those on whom the powers "manifest") must be treated with respect and shown every consideration during a ceremony. Usually one or more amombos (leaders) from other centers are invited to a big ceremony, and, as honored guests, they receive the best in hospitality and participate actively in the rites. The man who kills the animals offered as sacrifices, the drummers, other ritual assistants, and the cooks are paid for their services or are given presents by the presiding leader.

Minor Shango ceremonies are held from time to time, but the major rites for each chappelle take place during a four-day period some time between June and November. A four-day annual ceremony begins on Tuesday night with a prayer meeting. Original prayers follow several repetitions of the Lord's Prayer; Hail Mary; and the Apostle's Creed. After Eshu, who is identified with Satan, is dismissed, the other powers are invited to the ceremony. Ogun, the Yoruba god of war who is equated with Saint Michael in Shango belief, is summoned first. The drummers play his rhythm and one of his songs is sung. After Michael takes possession of one of his followers, other powers arrive. Drumming, singing, spirit possessions, and dancing continue all night, the climax coming at dawn with the sacrifice or pigeons, doves, chickens, ducks, agoutis, morocoys (land turtles), goats and sheep. Similar rites are performed on the following three nights, often including at some point the sacrifice of a bull. Attendance each night may range from a few dozen to several hundred persons. Almost no one who is well-behaved is barred from a ceremony, and the host is obligated to provide food at intervals for the participants.

The musical instruments used in a Shango ceremony consist mainly of a set of three drums and from three to a dozen or more pairs of chac-chacs (rattles). The drums are made from the trunks of the breadfruit, avocado, or cedar trees. The largest drum (Bemba) is played with one stick, the second and third drums (Congo and Oumalay) with two sticks. In length the drums range from ten to twenty inches, and in diameter from six to twelve inches. The drums are covered with goat-skin held in place by twine rather than by pegs. Unlike the drums used in Haitian vodun or in the Arada cult in Trinidad, these instruments are double - rather than single-headed. Chac-chacs are small, round, seed-filled calabashes to which handles have been attached. Seen less frequently at Shango ceremonies are two other instruments: the shagby, a large, round calabash

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SHANGO ALTAR AND IMPLEMENTS OF THE POWERS, BELMONT, TRINIDAD.



STOOL FOR SHANGO, COUVA, TRINIDAD.



SHANGO PALAIS, TACARIGUA, TRINIDAD.

(from fifteen to eighteen inches in diameter) whose top has been cut off and replaced with a piece of goatskin, which is used as a drum; and a long, slender calabash filled with threaded buttons which is used as a rattle. Neither the grage (a piece of roughened corrugated iron which is scraped with a spike) nor the ogan (a flat piece of iron which is struck with a metal rod), instruments which play a prominent part in Haitian vodun, and, in the case of the ogan, in Arada ceremonies in Trinidad, were observed in Trinidadian Shango rituals. The whistles and the small handbells of vodun also are absent in Shango.

At an annual Shango ceremony, the participants "dance" by moving back and forth within a short range, marking time, bending the knees and straightening up rapidly, clapping hands, swaying, and, at times, circling the "palais" in single file with a springing step. When a "power" manifests on him, the "dancing" of a follower becomes more lively. He marches to and fro in the palais, bows and whirls in front of the drummers, dances to the rhythms played by the drummers in honor of the power that has possessed him, thrusts the lower half of his body forward and backwards, shakes his shoulders vigorously, runs from the palais to the chapelle to kneel or to throw himself on the floor, embraces other participants whether or not they are possessed at the moment, pours water from a jar at the four corners of the palais, waves the "implement" (sword, broom, oar, etc.) of the possessing power, sings, speaks the "unknown" tongue, throws his head back and forth, groans, flings his arms, falls to the ground, and seizes and shakes both hands of another person. Dancing at special healing and conjuring ceremonies consists mainly of circling the palais first in a counterclockwise, then in a clockwise, direction. Individual "dancing", as in the annual ceremonies, also occurs.

In Shango rituals, words of African derivation are combined with French Creole phrases in what the devotees call the "Yoruba language." Catholic prayers are recited in English at the beginning of a ceremony, and English words are heard frequently during the ceremony.

The Shango music presented here was recorded at two cult centers; one in the Belmont section of Port of Spain, and the other in a rural section several miles from Couva, a town situated thirty miles south of the capital.

#### Shouters

The Shouters, or Spiritual Baptists as they prefer to be called, are lower-class men and women mainly of African descent, who belong to demonstrative, fundamentalist cult groups. They correspond fairly closely to the Revival Zionists of Jamaica. The term "Shouters" has been given to them because of the "rejoicing" they do during their meetings. Shouters services were forbidden by law from 1917 until 1951, but in recent years the cult has flourished. Most of the Spiritual Baptist churches are small, but memberships run from less than fifty to three hundred or more. The Shouters recordings were made in churches in Santa Cruz, Tunapuna, and Daberdie, all located within a dozen miles of Port of Spain on the road to Arima.

A Shouters church is dominated by an altar filled with candles, vases of flowers, crucifixes, placards, and religious pictures. The "center" of the church may or may not include a post decked



SHOUTERS ALTAR, TUNAPUNA, TRINIDAD.



SHOUTERS BAPTISMAL CEREMONY, MARACAS BAY, TRINIDAD.

with flags for the "spirits" and used as a support for a "chariot wheel", a ritual object which is spun from time to time during a service. The "center" of the church invariably includes a large, brass handbell, one or more vases or jars of flowers, and lighted candles. During a meeting, lighted candles are placed also in the four corners of the church, at the entrance and at the centers of the sides of the church. Usually the floor is made of packed earth, and benches to accommodate from thirty to a hundred or more persons are spaced around the building. In addition to the main structure, many Spiritual Baptist leaders construct a small separate room or "sacred chamber" where "mournin'" rituals are held.

While a Shouters church revolves around a leader, usually called "Pastor", "Mother", or "Brother", the affairs of the group are handled to some degree on a democratic basis. Unlike Shangoists, Spiritual Baptist groups have many offices, each symbolized by a certain type of dress or object. Among the offices commonly found are: Shepherd, prophet, healer, interpreter, pointer, diver, prover, nurse, and matron.

The basic Shouters ceremony, held on Sunday evening, consists of hymn-singing, accompanied at

times by handclapping but not by drums or rattles, praying (both standardized prayers such as the Lord's Prayer, and long, original but stereotyped prayers), Bible reading and reciting, chalking marks on the floor or on the walls of the church, bell-ringing, possessions by the Holy Spirit, preaching by the pastor and two or three guest speakers, and taking the collection. Other important Spiritual Baptist rites include baptism in "living" water (river or sea), and "mournin'" (a period of fasting and praying during which vision and revelations are sought). Street meetings, conducted for the purpose of gaining converts, as well as prayer meetings, are held regularly or sporadically.

With the exception of rather large, heavy handbells, no musical instruments are used in Shouters ceremonies. The pastor or one of the officers of a church rings the handbell briefly at the beginning and the end of a service, and one or more persons ring the bell during the ceremony when the Holy Spirit manifests on (possesses) them. Handclapping and foot-patting help to set the rhythm of the hymn-singing. The tambourine, sometimes seen in Jamaican revivalist ceremonies, was not observed at Spiritual Baptist services.

#### Number of Cultists in Trinidad

It is impossible to estimate accurately the number of Shangoists and Shouters in Trinidad. Some devotees attend a number of the large, annual Shango ceremonies given in different cult centers. Some persons attend a Spiritual Baptist church regularly but participate from time to time in Shango ceremonies. Some Shangoists attend the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, or Presbyterian church with some regularity. For some, the principal attractions of a Shango chappelle or a Shouters church are the healing and conjuring which are available through cult leaders. There are scores of centers of each of these two cults in Trinidad and each has thousands of follows.

#### Acculturation

Through the acculturative process, the Shango cult in Trinidad has combined a number of West African beliefs and practices, in pure or reinterpreted form, with elements of Catholicism. Such Yoruba gods as Shango, Ogun, Obatala, Oya, Aja, Osain, and Oshun are among the leading "powers" of the cult. Dancing, drumming, handclapping, spirit possession, the sacrifice of animals, and the offering of food to the gods are African-derived parts of a Shango ceremony. The belief in revelation by the gods in giving remedies to men for illness or trouble is an African retention. The numerous uses of water in religious and magical rituals seem to be African-Christian syncretisms, as does the extensive use of charms. The polytheism of West African religions has been reinterpreted by equating certain of the old Yoruba gods with selected Catholic saints. Other Catholic elements in Shango include: Catholic prayers, rosaries, crosses, and cruxifixes, the occasional reading of passages from the Bible, the sign of the cross, and candles.

African cultural influences are less numerous and less conspicuous among the Shouters, but they are by no means lacking. Spirit possession in Spiritual Baptist ceremonies is seldom, if ever, limited to manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Sooner or later one or more devotees become possessed by one of the Shango powers. Water is poured ritually in

much the same way it is in Shango. "Rejoicing" during a Shouters ceremony may involve some dancing. On special occasions, animals (especially pigeons or doves) may be sacrificed and food offered to "the spirits." Beliefs concerning the efficacy of healing and conjuring rites, as well as the actual procedures and formulas, are similar to or identical with those found in Shango.

#### Social Functions of the Shango and Shouters Cults

Lower class persons who participate in the life of these cults obtain at least temporary emotional relief from the frustrations and disappointments of the daily round. Esthetic satisfactions are derived from singing, drumming, dancing, and viewing the attractively decorated chapel or church. The cults serve to establish interaction among those who are passing through life crises. Cult ceremonies and cult activity in general provide opportunities for self-expression and for recognition. Devotees receive advice and counsel from the leader, as well as friendship and affection from cult associates. The dysfunctions of the cults include: the financial exploitation of some cult followers, and, in some cases, the worsening of physical or mental health as a result of the use of ineffective healing techniques.

#### CULT MUSIC OF TRINIDAD George Eaton Simpson

#### NOTES ON THE RECORDINGS

##### SIDE I, Band 1: SHANGO OH BABABA SONG.

Sung to welcome Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning who is equated with St. John in the shango cult of Trinidad. Baba means "father" or "ancestor". The occasion is the four-day annual ceremony given at a "Yoruba" temple in the Belmont section of Port au Spain.

##### SIDE I, Band 2: SINGING AT ANNUAL SHANGO CEREMONY

Much of the singing at a shango ceremony consists of repeating the name of a power and inviting him to attend the ceremony. The singing continues as a "power" arrives and during the time he "manifests" on a follower. Much of the singing lacks coordination.

##### SIDE I, Band 3: DRUMMING AND VOCAL RESPONSE AT SHANGO CEREMONY

##### SIDE I, Band 4: SOLO BY SHANGO RITUAL LEADER

A Yoruba liturgical song sung outside a ceremony by a leader from Arouca, Trinidad to demonstrate way of calling "powers" (in this case, Ogun and Shango) to the "palais."

##### SIDE I, Band 5: SOLO BY SHANGO RITUAL LEADER

Song derived from Catholic liturgical music.

##### SIDE I, Band 6: DRUMMING DURING ANNUAL CEREMONY IN A RURAL AREA

Recorded in a shango "palais" near Couva, Trinidad.

##### SIDE I, Band 7: DRUMMING NEAR COUVA

Often a peak in a shango ceremony is reached about midnight. The singing in this selection is accompanied by drums and rattles.

##### SIDE II, Band 1: BELLRINGING AT SHOUTERS SERVICE

A "Spiritual Baptist" service on Sunday evening begins with the ringing of a handbell. Santa Cruz (Port of Spain).

##### SIDE II, Band 2: SINGING AT SHOUTERS SERVICE

Responsorial type of singing, with the leader and the congregation alternating in singing the lines of a hymn.

##### SIDE II, Band 3: SUNDAY EVENING SHOUTERS SERVICE

Recital of the 23rd Psalm, antiphonal singing, and praying by an officer of the church with response by other participants.

##### SIDE II, Band 4: SINGING AT SHOUTERS SERVICE

##### SIDE II, Band 5: BELLRINGING AND CHANTING

Recorded at the middle of a Sunday evening meeting of a Shouters group in Santa Cruz, Trinidad.

##### SIDE II, Band 6: SHOUTING AND HANDCLAPPING AT SHOUTERS SERVICE

##### SIDE II, Band 7: SHOUTERS SERMON

Fragment of a Sermon by the assistant pastor of a Santa Cruz Spiritual Baptist church.

##### SIDE II, Band 8: SINGING AND HANDCLAPPING AT SHOUTERS SERVICE

Part of a Shouters service in Tunapuna, Trinidad.

##### SIDE II, Band 9: TALKING IN "TONGUES."

A number of devotees become possessed by the Holy Spirit during a Shouters service in Daberdie, Trinidad. In this selection, a possessed woman speaks the "unknown tongue."