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**Rhythms of Freedom:**

**Afro-Brazilian Drums Between Home, Community, and Resistance.**



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TB B07

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## **Rhythms of Freedom: Afro-Brazilian Drums Between Home, Community, and Resistance**

**Abstract:** Afro-Brazilian drums carry more than rhythm: they hold memory, shape community, and pulse with centuries of resistance, weaving bridges between past and future, bodies and territories. This text follows their echoes through the terreiros and Quilombos of Belo Horizonte, where sound becomes a place of belonging and a force of everyday resistance.

Only the muffled rhythm coming from the unremarkable house revealed what was about to happen that evening. The pulsing sound echoed through the street as we approached the small *terreiro*, a ritual center of the Afro-Brazilian Umbanda religion, on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte. Beside me walked Makota Celinha, a religious leader and activist in the Black community of Belo Horizonte, who had invited me that evening to the *Festa de Exú*, which was about to begin.

Inside, the air smelled of incense and fried manioc. The rhythm of the three large *atabaques*, the drums typical of *Umbanda* and *Candomblé*, standing at the head of the room, was immediately captivating. Both are Afro-Brazilian religions rooted in West and Central African traditions. While *Candomblé* centers on the direct worship of the *Orixás* - divine energies of nature such as the wind, the sea, and fire - through song, dance, and ritual initiation, *Umbanda* combines this African foundation with elements of Indigenous cosmologies and European Spiritism. The center of the room was clear, an altar of flowers and ritual objects forming the heart of the celebration. After a while, the beat of the drums shifted, the rhythm grew more demanding, and the participants began to clap and sing to call the spirits.

### **Whirling Between Worlds: Embodied Defiance of Colonial Gender**

And then they came - the *Pomba Giras* and the *Exús*, feminine and masculine spiritual entities of the Afro-Brazilian tradition, guardians of the crossroads and messengers between the human world, the ancestors, and the *Orixás* - the divine forces of nature. After the entities descended

into the bodies of some of the mediums present, they spiralled through the room, cigars between their fingers and bottles of *cachaça* - Brazil's strong sugarcane liquor - in their hands, laughing and dancing, while the drums accompanied their movements like a heartbeat, celebrating their evening, their *Festa de Exú*. Here, in this *terreiro*, gender was fluid: some men incorporated *Pomba Giras*, while women danced as *Exús*. The *Mãe de Santo*, the spiritual leader of the *terreiro* and herself a trans woman, smiled. For many here, this place is a sanctuary - a space that affirms and celebrates Black, queer, and trans lives.

The spirits and deities of Candomblé and Umbanda particularly protect the disadvantaged, for they themselves embody experiences of exclusion and resistance - a legacy of slavery and an expression of Afro-Brazilian religions that arose from the experience of marginalization. That night revealed how deeply spirituality and sound are intertwined: the *atabaques* do more than mark the rhythm; they are living vessels of history, identity, and resistance, weaving an invisible bond to the ancestors, whose voices and struggles continue to breathe in these rhythms.

### **From the *Senzala* to the *Terreiro* - *Atabaques* as Afro-Brazilian Heritage**

*Atabaques* are far more than musical instruments. They are the heartbeat of Afro-Brazilian cultural and religious practices such as *Candomblé*, *Umbanda*, *Congado*, *Maracatu*, *Capoeira*, and *Samba*. Through their rhythms, they call the ancestors, engage in dialogue with the spirits, and structure the time of festivities and ceremonies. They are catalysts of social life: they set bodies in motion, make hands clap and voices rise, and in doing so, create living community.

This is also evident in the process of their making: many *atabaques* are still crafted today in local workshops, from hollowed-out tree trunks with carefully stretched goat or cow hides. The process follows ritual rules and is often accompanied by blessings or small offerings. In many *terreiros*, the drums are ritually consecrated and receive offerings before they can sound - a moment when their *axé* awakens, the sacred current of energy that animates all beings and objects in Afro-Brazilian cosmology. Each drum thus becomes part of a web of relationships between humans, animals, plants, and spirits.



CENARAB: Three large drums in the Centro Nacional de Africanidade e Resistência Afro-Brasileira in front of a blue and white wall and a big window, decorated with green fabric. (CENARAB; National Center of Africanity and Afro-Brazilian Resistance), Belo Horizonte, Brazil; © Anne Cathrin Ziegler 2025.

## **The Language of the Drums: Memory, Community, Resistance**

In the *senzalas*, the living quarters of enslaved Africans on the plantations, drumming was an act of resistance - a whisper across the Atlantic, an echo of lost homelands. Despite the prohibition of cultural and religious practices of the enslaved Africans, these sounds of the Black diaspora survived. The rhythms passed down from this time are living archives, carrying stories of flight, survival, and insurgent home-making. They embody a cosmology in which body, spirit, and territory are inseparable, linking people to one another, to the powers of the *Orixás* and *Exús*, and to their own history.

As both material object and socio-cultural medium, the *atabaque* became a tool for preserving home in the face of colonial destruction. Its rhythms foster social bonds and thereby counteract the colonial project built on the deliberate destruction of relationships and communities. In the *senzalas*, people of different linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds were intentionally crammed together, while family ties and other social connections were systematically severed to suppress solidarity and, with it, the potential for resistance. The drums, however, defied the enforced silence of oppression: in their beats, the memory of a stolen homeland lived on; their shared rhythm became the heartbeat of new community and a source of resistance.

## **Threads of Belonging - Creating Resistant Black Communities**

Today, Black spaces, such as *terreiros* or *quilombos* - cultural and religious Black centers, originally founded as free settlements of escaped enslaved people - remain sanctuaries where this resistance lives on. Here, social networks and chosen families emerge, overcoming colonial fragmentation and providing spaces of safety, belonging, and self-determination, especially for Black women, LGBTQIA+, and trans people, where colonial norms of body and gender are consciously transgressed.

Community is central to Afro-Brazilian practice, as seen in the importance of shared meals. Alongside the drums, communal meals and ceremonial offerings are central elements of ritual and social practice - no celebration is complete without them. As an activist from one of the *quilombos* in Belo Horizonte once told me: “When someone new comes to the quilombo, we don’t first ask: ‘What is your name?’ but: ‘Are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?’”. These practices strengthen social bonds and form a living counterweight to the historical

fragmentation of slavery. Home, in this context, is collective, performative, and sensually experienced.

The rhythm of the drums opens this space, where fluid bodies move between genders, subverting colonial orders and embodying freedom beyond rigid boundaries of gender and power - creating new, resistant communities in which the memory of the ancestors meets the resistance of the present and the future can be reimagined. These spaces and practices are resistant because they deliberately enable what slavery sought to prevent: the emergence of community, continuity, and belonging. In this way, spirituality itself becomes a practice of resistance - against racism, coloniality, and patriarchal norms.



Kilombo Manzo: Three with fabric decorated Atabaques in the Kilombo Manzo Ngunzo Kaiango, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The drums are standing next to a large bamboo chair.; © Anne Cathrin Ziegler 2023.

### **The Rhythm of Home - Drums as a Nexus of Black Practices and Diasporic Memories**

The drum is more than just sound: it is a transatlantic artefact, a living symbol of the *Black Atlantic* (Gilroy 1993). In its beats, echo stories of displacement, survival, and resistance. In Brazil, its resonance lives in numerous Black practices: in *Congado*, which combines African and Catholic elements; in *Capoeira*, which unites dance, combat, and music into a resistant art

form; and in *Samba* and *Maracatu*, where the experience of oppression gives rise to collective joy and belonging. The drum unites these practices not only through sound but also at the heart of community: along with shared meals, it nourishes not only the body's hunger but also the deep longing for belonging, self-determination, and lived memory. It makes cultural identity both visible and sensually tangible - despite all colonial attempts to suppress and erase Black life and culture in Brazil.

Beyond that, the drum acts as a medium of memory in public space. In the streets of Belo Horizonte and other cities, the rhythms of the drums can be heard during festivals such as Carnival, turning the city into a temporary space of Black visibility. These events weave together ritual and popular culture, spirituality, political self-assertion, and cultural presence.



Quilombo Mangueiras: Five Samba Players wearing matching T-shirts with drums standing in front of a Bamboo workshop in the Quilombo Mangueiras, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. ; © Anne Cathrin Ziegler 2025.

## **Echoes Across Time: Memory in Motion**

The drums materialize home-making while embodying both memory and resistance. They translate the experience of diaspora and racism into sound, movement, and community. They show how a place can become a home through performative practices, community, and sensory experience - of taste, sound, or movement - despite and even against ongoing attempts to erase this belonging. In the beats of the *atabaques*, home is not only remembered but actively created: from collective action, and the togetherness of bodies, voices, and the more-than-human world. This “home in motion” is never static, but arises performatively in every festivity, ritual, and shared meal. For the Black communities around Belo Horizonte - the *quilombos*, *terreiros*, *samba* and *capoeira* groups - this means that their home and territories are protected not only by land ownership or legal recognition, but above all through the continuous collective practice of ritual, music, and gathering, which constantly renews the social and spiritual bond of home.

Drums are thus archives of memory and at the same time epistemic tools for shaping the future: they weave threads between past, present, and the hope of collective self-determination. They not only preserve the memory of loss and survival but also produce their own resistant knowledge that challenges colonial narratives. Every beat is an act of remembrance and, at the same time, an act of learning - translating the experience of Black diaspora, spirituality, and collective self-assertion into the present and opening up alternative spaces of knowledge in which sound, body, and spirituality form ways of knowing beyond Western logics. In their rhythms lives the history of loss and reappropriation, of pain and healing, of past and future. The drum thus becomes a medium that not only remembers but sets knowledge in motion - a knowledge that arises from lived experience, community, and resistance. In its sound, the transatlantic heritage becomes alive - and creates worlds in which Black, queer, and diasporic lives not only survive but flourish.



Quilombo dos Arturos:Atabaques in the Congado of the Quilombo dos Arturos, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The drums are part of the community's chapel, composed of different statues of Christian and African Saints. ; © Anne Cathrin Ziegler 2025.

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### **Kommentar von Cord Arendes, TP C01**

*The rhythm of the drum is calling* – ein zugleich poetischer wie wohl subtiler Verweis auf Situationen, in denen Menschen einen starken Drang verspüren, auf Reize aus ihrer Umwelt zu reagieren; seien diese nun eher praktischer, mehr emotionaler oder gar spiritueller Natur. Als Objekt bzw. genauer als Objektgruppe, ist die Trommel in ihrer basalen Funktion als Rhythmusinstrument in vielerlei Hinsicht anschlussfähig: So kann es sich bei ihr unter anderem um ein Instrument, ein Kinderspielzeug, ein Sammlerstück oder ein Ergebnis handwerklichen Könnens handeln. Trommeln riefen in früheren Zeiten Soldaten zum Kampf auf, sie bestimmten den Takt auf den Ruderbänken von Galeeren, sie forderten ein Publikum zur Aufmerksamkeit auf oder begleiteten Feierlichkeiten und rituelle Bräuche. Bei Trommeln handelt es sich um zu allen Zeiten und in allen kulturellen Kontexten genutzte Objekte. Selbst wenn wir eine Trommel nur sehen, wissen wir, wie sie klingt – das Trommeln spricht neben dem Seh- und Gehörsinn auch den Bereich des Haptischen an. Während viele Objekte sich darin erschöpfen, einer mehr oder weniger ehrfürchtigen Anschauung zu dienen, setzen Trommeln eine aktive Praktik, das Trommeln, voraus. Eine solche – von den Musikern wie dem Publikum geteilten – Praxis ist im Beitrag in all ihren Facetten beschrieben. Trommeln stehen hier als Verweis, als Zeichen dafür, was es heißt, nicht nur einen physischen Raum miteinander zu teilen, sondern ein gemeinsames Bewusstsein zu spüren – über Zeiten und Grenzen hinweg. Wenn es um den *Herzschlag* einer Gemeinschaft, in diesem Fall einer Exilgemeinschaft geht, dominiert die symbolische Dimension die aufgezählten Bezüge zum Objekt: Als Gegengewicht zur eigenen durch Gewalterfahrungen geprägten Geschichte und zugleich als Verweis auf deren transatlantische Dimensionen, als Stimulus für emotionale Bindungen, für Formen der sozialen Zugehörigkeit – und damit als Symbol für Heimat(en) im weitesten Sinne sowie als Objekt, das

auf dem Zeitstrahl nicht nur auf die Vergangenheit (Erinnerung und Archiv), sondern über die performativen Praktiken immer auch auf die Gestaltbarkeit von Zukünften verweist. Der Beitrag spricht mit dem Fallbeispiel *Afro-Brazilian Drums* Aspekte und Ebenen an, die auch für Objekte aus anderen Teilprojekten bedenkenswert sind.