

Feeling the Afro-Cuban 6/8 Polyrhythm on Guitar

by Dennis Winge

Learning to play the Afro-Cuban 6/8 polyrhythm will be useful even if you never play Afro-Cuban music because it will enhance your rhythmic versatility for life. Knowing it will allow you to:

- give rhythmic variety to any triplet-based meter such as 3/4, 6/8, 12/8 or 4/4 shuffle
- play polyrhythmically while in straight 4/4 time
- more accurately be able to feel the common rhythms of half-note, quarter-note, eighth-note triplets
- learn the concept of how polyrhythms work so you can then more easily explore more complicated relationships such as 4:3, 5:4, etc. if you wish to later

The basic Afro-Cuban rhythm looks like this:

The image shows musical notation for the basic Afro-Cuban 6/8 polyrhythm. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a treble clef in 6/8 time, showing a sequence of notes: quarter, quarter, eighth, eighth, quarter, quarter, eighth, eighth. Below the notes are directional markings: three squares (down) followed by three inverted triangles (up). The bottom two staves are guitar tablature for the Treble (T), Middle (A), and Bass (B) strings, showing a sequence of fret numbers: 1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1.

The basic count is “1 2 3 & & &” or, as the directional markings indicate, down down down up, up up up. It may be fairly easy to strum this rhythm but the real trick to feeling the clave is tapping your foot in 4/4 because this is a polyrhythmic feel and doing so will allow you to move back and forth between feeling the music in 4 or feeling it in 3.

If you look at it from the point of 4 rather than 6, it looks like this:

The image shows musical notation for the Afro-Cuban 6/8 polyrhythm viewed in 4/4 time. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a treble clef in 4/4 time, showing a sequence of notes: quarter, quarter, eighth, eighth, quarter, quarter, eighth, eighth. Below the notes are directional markings: three squares (down) followed by three inverted triangles (up). The bottom two staves are guitar tablature for the Treble (T), Middle (A), and Bass (B) strings, showing a sequence of fret numbers: 1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1.

As you can see, looking at it in 4/4 implies two sets of 3 quarter-note triplets in 1 bar, or one set of them over 2 beats, or 3 over 2. To be able to feel both the 3 and the two at the same time, it is essential that you tap your foot in 4/4. The foot will tap on beat 1,

then in between the second and third notes above (which is beat 2), then on the rest (beat 3), and in between the last two notes above (which is beat 4), like this:

In order to do this accurately, we will break down the 6 over 4 implied by the entire clave into 3 over 2 first. The lowest common multiple of 2 and 3 is 6, so this will be our common unit for the time being:

unit:	1	2	3	4	5	6

Then we will divide it in two groups of three (called “2-count”) by saying the following rhythm out loud while tapping our foot on beats 1 and 2.

2-count:	1	&	a	2	&	a
foot taps:	x			x		

Next, while still tapping the foot, we will change the way we count to three groups of two (called “3-count”):

unit:	1	2	3	4	5	6
2-count:	1	&	a	2	&	a
3-count	1	&	2	&	3	&
foot taps:	x			x		

Notice that the foot taps on the “and of 2,” i.e. half-way through the second beat of the “3-count.” When strumming, this can be a little challenging at first because the “and of 2” would get an up-strum as per the following:

unit:	1	2	3	4	5	6
3-count	1	&	2	&	3	&
strum:	down	up	down	up	down	up
foot taps:	x			x		

Take it slow at first. Set a metronome to 40 to 60 beats per minute on a 2-beat cycle and keep your foot tapping. Count the “2-count” above to feel the subdivisions correctly and then switch to the “3-count.” Count out loud and make the up & down strumming motion without hitting the strings before you begin to play. Once you get used to it, gradually speed up to 100 bpm.

The next step is to remove the “and of 1”:

count	1		2	&	3	&
strum:	down		down	up	down	up
foot taps:	x			x		

Once you get used to that, take out the “and of 2”:

count	1		2		3	&
strum:	down		down		down	up
foot taps:	x			x		

Notice that the foot is tapping between the 2nd and 3rd downstrokes.

If you are able to play all of the above, congratulations! You are well on your way to feeling and implementing polyrhythmic relationships in many different contexts. However, we still need to add the ‘back half’ of the Afro-Cuban 6/8 clave. So far we have only been playing the first bar of the pattern. The second half of the pattern is:

unit:	1	2	3	4	5	6
count		&		&		&
strum:		up		up		up
foot taps:	x			x		

Because this can be confusing at first since there are no downstrokes, let's put in a downstroke on beat 1, then we'll come back to the above. Say, tap, and play the rhythm below:

count	1	&		&		&
strum:	down	up		up		up
foot taps:	x			x		

Once you are able to play this, take out the down strum on beat 1:

count		&		&		&
strum:		up		up		up
foot taps:	x			x		

If you have made this far, you are now able to play both halves of the clave. Now, let's put them together. We will need a total of 12 units so we can look at both bars of 6/8 as it was originally presented above:

unit	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
4-count	1	&	a	2	&	a	3	&	a	4	&	a
6-count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	5	&	6	&
pattern	1		2		3	&		&		&		&
strum	down		down		down	up		up		up		up
foot	x			x			x			x		

If this looks confusing, let's break it down. First, count the "4-count" while tapping your foot:

4-count	1	&	a	2	&	a	3	&	a	4	&	a
foot	x			x			x			x		

Next, while your foot is still tapping, switch your count to the "6-count"

6-count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	5	&	6	&
foot	x			x			x			x		

Next, strum along with your count and tap:

6-count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	5	&	6	&
strum	down	up	down	up	down	up	down	up	down	up	down	up
foot	x			x			x			x		

When this is comfortable enough, leave out the "and of 1," the "and of 2," and downbeats 4, 5, & 6, like this:

6-count	1		2		3	&		&		&		&
strum	down		down		down	up		up		up		up
foot	x			x			x			x		

All the steps below are also explained in [video format here](#). I didn't tell you about it until now because it takes time to work out each step above, and watching a video from someone who already knows how to do it might lure you into thinking you can do it in only a few minutes. It may even take several different sessions to master this feel, and it will be well worth the effort. In any case, the video is meant only to be "recap."

Once you have the basic feel, try strumming along with backing tracks or recorded music that is in 6/8 as can typically be found in a lot of African music, Cuban music, or Latin jazz.

In the end, the process we used can be applied to any polyrhythms you may choose to explore in the future. Here are the steps:

1. Access the subdivisions common to both the meter and the desired polyrhythm (in the case of the 3:2 polyrhythm we saw in the Afro-Cuban 6/8 clave, we subdivided each beat of 2 into 3 parts, giving us 6 subdivisions over two beats because 6 is the lowest common multiple of 2 and 3).
2. Regroup the subdivisions according to the polyrhythm you want to access (in this case we regrouped the two groups of three into 3 groups of 2. In other words, "1 & a 2 & a" became "1 & 2 & 3 &")
3. Leave out certain subdivisions in order to play the desired rhythm. (In this case, we took "1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 &" over 4 beats and turned it into "1 2 3 & & &.")

All the best of luck to you with your growing rhythmic versatility.