Race, Gender, and Class Embodied in Cuban Dance

Yvonne Payne Daniel
Smith College

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs

Recommended Citation
Daniel, Yvonne Payne (1994) "Race, Gender, and Class Embodied in Cuban Dance," Contributions in Black Studies: Vol. 12, Article 8. Available at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol12/iss1/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Afro-American Studies at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contributions in Black Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
Yvonne Payne Daniel

RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS EMBODIED IN CUBAN DANCE*

DANCE "HOUSES" OR EMBODIES physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual information within culturally specific movement sequences. Although all dances have varied movements, their movements, songs, and rhythms can be analyzed to demonstrate connections between dance and other arenas of social life; this is the charge of dance anthropology. In this paper, I use the anthropological perspective and methodology to discuss what the dance rumba indicates in terms of race, gender, and class in Cuban society.

In contemporary Cuba, a previously marginal cultural form now publicizes new paradigms in a complex process of social change. Within institutional strategies of cultural preservation and re-education, rumba, a dance of predominantly lower class black Cubans in the nineteenth century, has been transported from the streets and barrios to national and international theaters. Before the Revolution of 1959, Cuban ballet and modern dance received acclaim nationally while folkloric dances were not particularly encouraged. Since the Revolution, a shift of support and interest has occurred in Cuban cultural policies. Rumba has been institutionalized through a series of monthly public activities organized through the Ministry of Culture. It is supported to represent the interests of the working masses and to solidify participation of the artistic community in the social advancement of a new political system. Despite the support of this important cultural expression of the masses by the socialist revolution, rumba is not common within all segments of the Cuban population. It remains a dance form primarily performed by dark-skinned or black Cubans with relatively little direct participation from other segments of Cuban society.

Beginning in 1979, rumba in Cuba has been promoted in ways that other dances have not. Other folkloric and popular dances, such as casino, son, or conga, are easier to perform and involve the participation of a larger cross section of the total population, but these have not received as much attention. As rumba has been appropriated and formalized in its presentation to a national and international public, it has shifted from a spontaneous, improvisational form to a prepared, manipulated form. Yet, rumba continues to forcefully embody a significant aspect of Cuban national culture.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RUMBA

A rumba or rumbo is a festive event or collective celebration which is believed to have grown out of the social circumstances of Havana city and the surrounding...
provinces of Havana and Matanzas. Unlike the large areas of small farming typical of Cuban settlement in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and unlike plantation life which fully developed later in Cuba during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the urban capital contained a variety of people: slaves, mulattos, colonists, and free blacks, especially from Spain. In the second half of the nineteenth century these groups, which were structurally linked by the mulatto class, congregated after work at the docks, in the marinas, within urban patios, and solares. With the abolition of slavery in 1886, dark-skinned Cubans joined poor light-skinned Cubans in urban areas looking for jobs. All groups adjusted to the particular conditions of free people in a society based on color and class, but participated together from time to time in communal gatherings called rumba. Rumba is also the name of a dance/music tradition that refers to a complex of related Cuban dances. In the present essay these distinct dances are categorized and those that are related are collectively called a complex (see Example 1). 

Example 1: RUMBA COMPLEX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>yambú</th>
<th>rumba del tiempo de España</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>guaguancó</td>
<td>giribilla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>columbia</td>
<td>batarumba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The complex comprises both dance and music structures because of the intimate relationship between both systems (see Example 2).

Example 2: RUMBA DANCE AND SONG STRUCTURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section I</th>
<th>Section II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vocalizing</td>
<td>responsorial refrain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>duet, set verses</td>
<td>dancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solo, improvised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>drum ending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(diana or lalaleo)</td>
<td>(estribillo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(inspiración)</td>
<td>(yambú, guaguancó, columbia, batarumba, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(estrofa)</td>
<td>(el fin)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rumba complex developed in the nineteenth century and was transported from Cuba throughout the world. Outside of Cuba since the 1930s, it has been mistakenly considered as a single dance, often called “r-h-u-m-b-a or rumba de salon,” a popular ballroom dance. The ballroom version uses traditional musical structure, but is decidedly different from traditional rumba dancing.

The rumba complex has three main forms: yambú, guaguancó and columbia. In the first two, rumba focuses on the improvised chase between a male and female dancer. In the third, traditionally a series of male dancers compete rhythmically with each other. Rumba spread throughout and beyond Cuba, but the forms evolved due to the circumstances of particular locales.
There is much debate regarding exactly where or when the dance complex began; there is now some agreement, however, that it originated in Havana and Matanzas provinces in the late 1860s. The two couple forms emerged in urban areas and the male solo competitive form evolved in rural regions. The male dance development suggests the imbalance of males and females in rural areas resulting from the character and length of Cuban slave trading. The male rumba form is also reminiscent of male solo dancing that takes place in secret society gatherings, called Abakua or Carabali in Cuba. The relationship goes further than two conforming structures of male solo dancing; the connection between Abakua and columbia is pronounced due to rumba gestures and movements that directly relate to the gestures and movements of Abakua dancing.

The instrumentation and musical motifs, that is, drumming patterns, of the rumba complex also suggest evidence of Kongo-Angolan influence throughout Cuba. Each form of the dance complex is distinctive, however, all utilize a capella singing (that is, singing without melodic instrumentation), specific percussion, and distinctive movement patterns. (See Example 3 for the basic rumba rhythm that is sounded on the wooden sticks, called claves).

Example 3: RUMBA CLAVE

```
1  &  2  &  3  &  4  &
X  X  X  X

1  &  2  &  3  &  4  &
X  X
```

Rumba, both as a dance and as an event, emerged as a Cuban creation, a creole expression of the lower classes, an artistic product of the streets and barrios. It fused bits of popular material: songs from current hits of the day, local news or gossip, chants of African-derived religions, and various street cries or hollers.

Example 4: RUMBA REFRAINS

1) "I'm gonna sing, I'm gonna sing for you, baby."

2) "Oh, Mr. Reagan, where are your brains? With Grenada, you've sunk low!"

3) "Omaoma, okeoke."

4) "I bring Guines potatoes, cabbages, new sweet potatoes and ripe plantains."

5) "Ave Maria, morena."

Published by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst, 1994
Spanish influence contributed language, vocal stylization, song structure and principles governing the relationship between instruments. African heritage is displayed in call and response patterns, inclined and flexed postures, polyrhythms in the music and the body, the manner of playing instruments, and an emphasis on torso-generated movement and isolation of body parts. Both heterogeneous cultures, Spanish and African, injected an affinity for improvisation and rhythmic elaboration.

Rumba is one of two dances which have national significance for the general Cuban public. The other, danzón, often called the Cuban national dance of the nineteenth century, is a social couple dance. It is accorded one day of recognition (Danzón Day) and rumba is usually accorded two weeks for a festival in October. Each of Cuba’s thirteen provinces celebrates its own culture once a year (Culture Week) with festivities that include rumba. In Havana and Matanzas provinces however, rumba occurs twice monthly in addition to Culture Week and the Rumba Festival. No other dances have an official place on the Cuban calendar; it is extraordinary and noteworthy that dances, but particularly rumba, are given prominence along with national heroes and important historic holidays. Probably danzón was not programmed as much because of its association with ballrooms and an elite segment of the social structure. This left rumba as a prime example for identification with the masses.

"DANCING HAVANA STYLE." PHOTO BY NORBERTO VALDEZ, OLD HAVANA, JANUARY 1994

THE BASIC FORMS OF RUMBA

Yambú is the rumba form characterized most often by the sound of a box drum, cajón. The terms, “box rumba” and “rumba de cajón” refer to the use of boxes when drums were prohibited by law. Historically, people used closets, table tops, spoons, and

http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol12/iss1/8
especially codfish boxes to create accompaniment for their songs. In *yambú* the mood is danced seduction. Both men and women actively partake of an enticing chase, displaying charm, poise, and attractiveness; the dance is pure flirtation.

In *guaguancó*, a faster rumba form, the *vacunao*, or "vaccination," is the goal. Cubans coined the word *vacunao* from *vacunar*, meaning "to vaccinate, join or unite," which, in the dance, is seen as a gesture made by the man towards the woman—generally a pelvic thrust, an elbow jab, a kick, or the swift whip of a scarf. Women dance with grace and seductiveness, but always try to avoid the *vacunao* by placing their skirts, hands, or scarves in front of their genital area or by turning around completely to deflect the men’s attempt. *Guaguancó* is a chase, discussed in terms of a metaphor in which a rooster stalks a hen.

The basic steps for the man and woman in both *yambú* and *guaguancó* are related. The musical structure, the purpose and the expressive qualities, however, differ. In *yambú* the dance consists of a cautious or calculated entrance of the woman with a slow, undulating pattern. The torso bends forward from the hips and lowers as the knees flex and the body turns slowly from side to side. The feet move alternately with side or front touch/step patterns (whole foot, in a parallel position). Physical contact between partners is very limited. Men and women touch when they exchange large scarves around the shoulders, when the man puts his hand on the woman’s shoulder or waist as they execute the lowering pattern, or when they exit the dance space. In *guaguancó* the couple dances in a more upright position and performs multiple gestures. These gestures serve as potential distractions aimed at the woman. There is an emphasis on the chase and the constant attempts to *vacunao*. One dance is lyrical and the other is filled with bursts of energy and dynamics; both are fluid with body undulations, especially in terms of women’s movement. The movement for men in *guaguancó* is developed in travelling steps and percussive movements.

*Columbia* is danced by consecutive male soloists. It is the fastest of the main three rumba forms and displays virtuosity, male prowess, and danced competition. This dance has very complicated small, running steps (*pisao*), isolated vibratory movements, quick changes in qualities and rhythms, and often, splits, jumps, and other acrobatic feats. It is improvisational and responds to the improvisational drumming that alternately initiates and accompanies the dancer. The order of dancers is dictated by virtuoso ability and challenging gestures (e.g., pointing the index finger up or down while executing *pisao* movements in front of the solo dancer) made by competing men.

*Rumba del tiempo de España* (rumba from the time of Spanish colonial control or *rumba de los viejos* (rumba of the old people) is a separate category of old mimetic rumba which may be of either *yambú* or *guaguancó* form, but which tends to be between the two in terms of speed.

*Batarumba* is one of the latest innovations. It has been reformulated and popularized since 1985 by a traditional ensemble, Afro-Cuba from Matanzas, and weaves the vast array of Yoruba religious songs, rhythms, and dances into the already dense creole fabric of Cuban rumba.12 After the *estrofa* (see Example 2) many dancers enter the circular space in front of the drums with *guaguancó* steps. This differs from the
three main rumba forms where a single couple or man dances in a series. The dancing couples can shift from the rumba chase to partnering with men holding women in ballroom position, the *son* portion of the dance. For example, couples alternate between *guaguancó*, *son*, and *casino*. A series of turns and passes develop the improvisational choreography as the drumming signals the inclusion of *bata* rhythms. With the addition of a refrain from a Yoruba chant, the dancers switch to the characteristic gestures and rhythms of Yoruba deities. A dancing couple shifts between three complexes (*rumba*, *Yoruba*, and *son*) and combines styles (traditional, “western,” *Havana*, *Matanzas*, ballroom, etc.). Both males and females have choices regarding when to shift and which form to dance, although for *son* forms, the male will usually initiate the partnering.

**Change Values**

Dance is not specifically designated as a national concern in contemporary Cuba. Rumba is not among identified political nor economic policy statements. Despite this, dance surfaces in Cuba as a possible means to obtain priorities within national political objectives. Within domestic organization and in the international arena, Cuban ideology emphasizes collective solidarity, self-determination, and values that attempt to erase hierarchical perspectives embedded in a history of slavery, colonialism, and capitalism before the Revolution of 1959. Because the ideology of the Revolution is committed also to previously marginalized and exploited segments of society, an effort is being made through cultural channels to identify with working class people and to rectify historical social inequality within the population. Rumba is encouraged in the hopes of gathering and maintaining commitment to the new values of the revolutionary government.

Rumba performance is guided indirectly by the Ministry of Culture and directly by the administrators of dance companies. An examination of Ministry organization reveals the extent of its influence and the ways in which it can encourage or limit performance opportunities. There is an organization of dance and dancers that follows district, city, province, and ultimately, national organization. The Ministry oversees all artists, both professional and amateur, as well as students who are training to become professionals. The Ministry is in charge of all performance venues and there is even a programming division within the Ministry, which suggests the content of performances is established and approved by Ministry officials in addition to approval by directors of dance companies. The Ministry is therefore aware of professional, traditional, and amateur performances and is ultimately responsible for the proliferation of rumba performance: in neighborhood cultural houses (*Casas de cultura*), at provincial cultural events, on national holidays, and during international academic, artistic, and political exchanges.

A shift from the street corner or home patio to the stages of patio-like theaters and community centers has occurred as a direct result of new and multiple performance opportunities made possible by government cultural programs through the Ministry of Culture. Each neighborhood has a culture house that offers a variety of events including
classes and performances. Rumba is being taught along with many other traditional and modern dances (as well as, with other entirely different courses).

As described above, rumba has been incorporated into national foci through its position on the national calendar and its repeated performance throughout the year, especially in Havana and Matanzas. Cuban rumba has emerged as a method of emphasizing and, thereby, supporting national goals. As a minuscule part of a mammoth undertaking towards education, cultural awareness, and most importantly, social cohesion, rumba has been politicized, that is, rumba has been used to express national heritage and to promote public ritual. Rumba performance in Culture Week activities throughout each province, in an annual national festival, and in countless neighborhood community centers throughout the nation serves as an educational force that suggests and publicizes new values.

Rumba plays a part in the effort to change values. Pre-revolutionary values emphasize divisions within the nation; the new ones assist cohesion. These values include Cuban identity, social equality in the domestic sphere, and self-determination and solidarity in the international sphere. At the world view level of analysis, rumba expresses Cuban identity and encourages solidarity, specifically with the working class. Simultaneously, however, at the choreographic level of analysis, segmentation is emphasized and social inequality is displayed.

CONTRADICTIONS SURROUNDING SKIN COLOR AND CLASS

At the world-view level of analysis rumba reveals the politicization of dance, that is, situations in which dance is used intentionally for public ritual and to express national (or ethnic) identity. Historically, rumba represents dark-skinned or black Cubans. With public recognition and national identity focused on rumba today, dark-skinned or black Cubans are acknowledged. Their affinity with all Cubans is invoked when they and their dances represent the nation. The official support of rumba has political implications; it is an attempt to erase racism of a previous era, to affirm a classless society in the present, and to assist the eradication of racism (in terms of skin color) in the future. In rumba performance one segment of society experiences equality with other segments by means of dancing their dance of social identity, by means of other social segments according respect and prestige, and by means of all segments uniting under the symbol of a previously degraded dance of the streets. Rumba, celebrated in calendar festivities and promoted in community cultural events (all sponsored by government agencies), expresses official commitment to all Cubans regardless of color or status. On these occasions rumba also illustrates present contradictions. Rumba becomes an instrument which can be used to verify the presumed equality of Cuban ideology and the lingering prejudice that exists in Cuban reality.17 I present the following data regarding rumba and skin color based on travel throughout several provinces of Cuba over the last five years.18

In non-official performing spaces and among the people, rumba is both admired and neglected depending on skin color and occasion, i.e., social/recreational or cultural/educational events. Both dark and light-skinned dance professionals participate
in and teach rumba to others in neighborhood cultural houses (Casas de cultura). Rumba performance is promoted in every neighborhood, district, city, and province throughout the island (organizacion municipal y provincial) and it is part of most cultural programming.

Most light-skinned Cubans are still hesitant to adopt rumba as their personal choice of dancing. Older light-skinned Cubans (over 35 years old) prefer son (traditional, folkloric), casino (modern) and conga (traditional, folkloric) and will dance often and enthusiastically. When asked about their favorite dance, they state their love of dancing and their preference for modern over traditional dance forms. When asked about rumba, they often affirm the importance of rumba to Cuba, e.g., “there is no Cuba without rumba,” but also, they claim not to know how to dance it.

Among younger light-skinned Cubans (16 to 35 years old), casino is danced more often than any other dance. Young Cubans do not generally dance rumba; they are dancing what they see on television and on videos from Mexico, Spain, Italy, Chekoslovakia, the former Soviet Union and the United States, e.g., Janet Jackson. Most will “sit out” a rumba presentation, however, they become tremendously responsive when popular Cuban bands, e.g., Irekere, Van Van or Ritmo Oriental, play a section of rumba within a casino piece. At these moments, crowds of young light-skinned Cubans will scream with delight, deepen into rumba position and dance modified versions of (usually) guaguancó form.

Most dark-skinned Cubans select rumba, conga and casino as their favorite dances. Rumba is both danced and admired among dark-skinned Cubans, even though a few dark-skinned Cubans also claim not to know how to dance it. At social gatherings in predominantly black areas, casino is usually danced first, but rumba follows, either as a full dance/music form or as an abbreviated musical form with singing and playing with boxes (cajon), i.e., without dancing. Older dark-skinned Cubans state their preferences more precisely, in terms of which form of rumba they prefer. They also point to particular community members that are renown for talent in performing rumba. Younger dark-skinned Cubans dance casino more often than rumba, but they are equally proficient in both dance complexes.

Mainly, rumba is chosen as the favorite dance by those connected directly or indirectly to folkloric dance/music, both dark and light-skinned Cubans. Other Cubans will select rumba when asked to chose their favorite folkloric dance. Professional and traditional folkloric dancers and musicians (with their extended families) relate their preference of rumba over other folkloric forms that are African or Spanish creations (differently developed in Cuba). These performers, and especially dance teachers, are creating change in this otherwise familiar situation of appropriated forms.

The Ministry has made sure that each segment of the Cuban populace will have rumba instruction and potentially will be able to dance rumba or thoroughly acquainted with it. Through systematic organization of professional dancers, all of whom can not enter the five professional Cuban dance companies, the Ministry of Culture has created a new group of rumberos. Generally, it is young dance professionals, but light-skinned ones in particular, who now often enter the rumba circle with darker-skinned Cubans and
who demonstrate correct rumba style and form. They often join in the competition of male solo dancing or improvisational singing, roles that have previously been reserved for dark-skinned performers. These light-skinned rumba performers particularly represent a growing number of Cubans that are being trained to dance rumba. Through these young professionals and their influence within light-skinned segments of the population, the marginal effects of politicization are shown. Some light-skinned Cubans dance rumba at official functions and also, at local social gatherings, e.g., at school celebrations of Teachers’ Day, at their neighborhood street parties, etc.; however, most Cubans still do not dance rumba.

Despite tremendous organization and proliferation of rumba, despite trained personnel who implement cultural programming, rumba is just beginning to show signs of increased popularity, in terms of dance performance, among sectors beyond those of black or dark-skinned Cubans. Rumba is still identified with a non-prestigious group, the former lower class, and many Cubans do not readily adopt its practices. Rumba is identified simultaneously with official support and prestigious connections through *Casas de cultura* and the Ministry of Culture. The government has encouraged the elevation of a cultural expression through institutional strategies that address national goals, social ills and political interests. It is striving for solidarity and re-education of values and is faced with deep attitudinal biases that suggest division.

**CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN FEMALE LIBERATION AND MACHISMO**

At the rumba group level or level of choreographic analysis, the rumba complex also indicates persistent values of inequality from the past in conflict with more recent examples of equality in the present. Rumba becomes the expression of lived contradictions between the public and private domains. Rumba points out Cuban values which are not easily revealed in public, social observations. Rumba is a performed contradiction in terms of dance, expressing both respect and honor of the sexes through courting/chase sections and simultaneously, expressing inequality and oppression through limited movement and participation among females. Rumba is a perceived contradiction at the social level, where customarily, the gaze is on the female. In reality, attention is on the male. At first glance, rumba seems to focus on the female dancer, giving the impression that she is dominant, powerful, in control or, at the very least, the central attracting figure. This is not so apparent under close scrutiny.

As directors, chiefs, supervisors and “bosses,” women are now entering customarily male domains in Cuba. This is true also of rumba. The form of rumba which was traditionally reserved for men, *columbia*, is being danced by women more often. In this way, but only occasionally, female dancers express equal status and exhibit new power through rumba. What is more common, however, is male dominance of rumba forms rather than a few, but revealing, examples of female assertiveness.

The male rumbero personifies Cuban maleness and perhaps Cuba itself; he is *guapo.* In the dance patterns of the couple forms, *yambú* and *guaguancó*, the male leads by inviting the female to dance, engaging in the danced chase and usually initiating the exit. Within the dancing, his arm, leg and shoulder movements cause the female to be...
Race, Gender, and Class in Cuban Dance
distracted and thereby, facilitate the vacunao. The floor pattern shows a chase, and it is the man who selects directions and paths of pursuit. His knee clapping movements, his sweeping arm gestures, his vibrating shoulder actions and his expansive locomotor patterns form dynamic visual magnets from which the female attempts to escape. The movements draw attention towards the male, not the female.

Rumba dancing reveals females who react and respond to male initiative most of the time. Women strategize in movement, but mostly defensively, rarely offensively. Sometimes older women challenge the men by opening their arms above their heads, backing into them, interrupting their path or traveling forcefully and quickly through the space. These movements in effect dare the man to attempt the vacunao. On these occasions, men typically express indignation, “What’s this? (¿Qué cosa es?)” and they leave the circle to another male. If another man does not enter quickly, or in other words, if the female is not handed to another male, the musicians stop. They are usually men also. Attraction towards the male is a constant in the dance and to a large extent in the culture.

The dance form dictates the personnel and focus of the dance and these have not changed significantly despite strong currents of female equality and liberation elsewhere in the public sphere. Policy is being carried out by men and women, but in an atmosphere of lingering machismo: the emphasis on being a male, male virility, superiority of men over women. Men are still the dominant group in Cuba. Notions of superiority and deference are embedded in their attitudes and behaviors and both Cuban men and women are products of an historic machista culture, as well as, a new egalitarian culture.

Yambú, guaguancó and columbia display an accommodation to gender stratification of the past. Batarumba, the latest version of rumba offers a more equal chance for females to maneuver. First of all, female posture is equivalent with male posture. Women can independently choose to dance in rumba style or in Yoruba style and are only slightly dependent when casino style is selected. Also, women can select, initiate or terminate styles as men can. In batarumba and those occasions when females dance columbia, rumba demonstrates an alteration of rules and behavior, as well as, changing patterns. The rumba complex illustrates a transition that is in progress in Cuban society and the values that are both stimulating and inhibiting change.

Culture is dynamic and changing rapidly in Cuba. The entrance of competitive female dancers in columbia has been applauded on occasion. Whether women will dance columbia and make it, also, a female form is not clear at this moment. Although Cuban women have been known to dance together (i.e., alone without men, e.g., in casino), when men were not around or when men were slow to invite a female partner, it is highly unlikely that females would dance columbia together. Male virility would be challenged and women in Cuban culture are properly cautious even when dancing/acting in the public arena.

CONCLUSIONS
To obtain solidarity in a society with conflicting cultural attitudes within thirty
plus years is a complex process (witness black/white relations in the United States for the last 214 years). The phases of re-education and rectification are many, but they begin with acknowledgment of the contradictions that exist. At the world view level of analysis, Cuba wants to portray a strong nation, a united people sharing its heritage and values. It has abolished racism institutionally in an effort to create unity and it has welcomed the politicization of rumba towards this end. At the societal level of analysis, however, rumba has not been entirely successful in displaying solidarity, equality, unity or re-education. Rather, rumba has revealed a continuing schism between the values of dark and light-skinned Cubans which is seen in terms of participation in rumba dancing. The government has minimized or overlooked crucial problems and rumba points to these.

With more Cubans able to dance rumba and with the proliferation of performance opportunities, increased rumba participation can be expected, but very gradually. Rumba is seen more frequently than ever in performance venues. It shows some signs of growth in terms of participation beyond the black or dark-skinned segment of Cuban society. Rumba was not taken from the people and given to paid performers as a meaningless symbol. Rather, the government paid the people who formerly danced rumba from time to time to perform it more frequently for the nation. Further, there is little resentment from those who always enjoyed rumba because rumba is even more accessible to them.

The larger segment of the population which does not participate in the dancing itself is slow to accept new and previously lower class values. To do so would point to an African identity which is still avoided in many instances of daily and official life, irrespective of official efforts to the contrary and irrespective of popular sayings that refer to “a hidden grandmother,” suggesting that most Cubans have a profoundly intimate African heritage. This segment of the population is now penetrated with young, light-skinned professionals who know how to dance rumba and who are teaching and encouraging others to learn.

While there is reluctance from the public at large to dance rumba, the rumba complex is still an intimate part of Cuba historically and an important connection to all that is exciting and powerfully Cuban today, i.e., cubania or lo cubano. Rumba is important because it expresses fundamental Cubaness, cubania, which most Cubans admit, both old and young, light or dark-skinned. Rumba establishes visual images and aural signals that have historically connected pleasure, pride and fun with the essence of being Cuban. Rumba allows all participants to experience Cubanness physically in their bodies or kinesthetically. Rumba remains the social and physical body of the Cuban people. It is a melange of singing, dancing and drumming that stimulates attention, light-hearted suspense and, for the most part, diverts tension and pressure. In the process of playing, dancing or watching rumba, participants feel its power. It demonstrates a living and evolving artistic form that has resisted social pressures that would disregard or eliminate a lower class expression. It is now supported in hopes that the positive, engaging aspects of rumba can help to undermine the racism and sexism of its origin. The extent to which light-skinned Cubans dance or play rumba fully and enthusiastically
Race, Gender, and Class in Cuban Dance

with black or dark-skinned Cubans is one indicator of changing values. The extent to which women dance columbia is another.

Rumba simultaneously points to equality and inequality. Official efforts support the promotion and proliferation of rumba, but the efforts themselves display a lingering failure to address prejudice (surrounding skin color) and discrimination (regarding the position of women) at their cores. Rumba illuminates the problems of the state in its attempt to link respect and prestige among all Cubans and rumba performance should point to the equalization of all segments in Cuban society. Yet, rumba performance visually affirms the persistent reality of its origins in the nineteenth century and the present unresolved situation. Dancing, singing and drumming rumba does not move the majority of Cubans to dance. Many are still biased against cultural expressions of the lower classes and African heritage as well. Identification with rumba, however, as the essence of Cuba does engage most Cubans.

To say “we’re all the same” or “there is no racism in Cuba” is to mask difference and potentially to permit prejudice and discrimination to fester. The potency of rumba is its source, Cuba, and its capacity to valiantly embrace contemporary ideology that comes in conflict with cultural realities. As a genuine Cuban expression, rumba both exhibits those realities and signals current goals. Dance, thereby, echoes and manifests bodily a situation of changing values in contemporary Cuba.

REFERENCES CITED

Alen, Olavo

Benedict, Burton

Boggs, Vernon, ed.

Cashion, Susan

Christopher, Luella Sue
1979 Pirouettes with Bayonets: Classical Ballet Metamorphosed as Dance-Drama and its usage in the People’s Republic of China as a
Daniel, Yvonne Payne

Tool of Political Socialization, University Microfilms: American University, Ph.D. dissertation.

Cowan, Jane

Daniel, Yvonne


Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro
1971  El negro en la economia habanera del siglo XIX. La Habana: Premio Union de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba.

Dunham, Katherine
1947  Las danzas de Haiti, Mexico City: Acta Antropología, Vol. II., No. 4., pp. 1-64.

Fraginals, Manuel Moreno, ed.

Hanna, Judith
1979  To Dance is Human. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Hintzen, Percy

Jahn, Janheinz

Kurath, Gertrude and Antonio Garcia
1970  Music and Dance in Tewa Plaza Ceremonies, New Mexico. Santa
Race, Gender, and Class in Cuban Dance
Fe: University of New Mexico Press.

Leon, Argeliers
1984 Del canto y el tiempo. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas.

Linares, Maria Teresa

Lopez-Valdes, Rafael L.
1989 African Ethnic Groups in Cuba, paper delivered at Stanford University, April.
1990 La influencia africana en la cultura cubana, lecture delivered at UNIAC, La Habana, July

Martinez-Alier, Verena

Martinez-Fure, Rogelio

McGarrity, Gail

Moliner, Israel
1987 La rumba in Del Caribe, Ano IV, No. 9, pp. 40-47.

Moore, Carlos

Ness, Sally
Novack, Cynthia
1990 Sharing the Dance; Contact Improvisation as Culture. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Ortiz, Fernando
1963 Contrapunteo Cubano del tabaco y el azucar. La Habana: Consejo Nacional de Cultura
1985 Los bailes y el teatro de los negros en el folklore (1951) de Cuba. La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales.

Primus, Pearl

Randall, Margaret

Royce, Anya

Snyder, Allegra Fuller
1978 Levels of Event Patterns: An Attempt to Place Dance in a Holistic Context. Paper presented for the Joint American Dance Guild and the Congress on Research in Dance conference, University of Hawaii, August.

Stubbs, Jean
1987 Gender Issues in Tobacco Farming in Cuba’s Socialist Economy Towards the 1990’s, Andrew Zimbalist, ed., Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner.
NOTES


2. I was privileged to live in Cuba in 1986-87 and I am grateful to the Cuban Ministry of Culture’s International Relations Department for its assistance during my fieldwork. My agreement was: in return for my apprenticeship with the National Folkloric Ensemble, I would tape all examples of dance that I witnessed throughout Cuba, make copies for their archives and forward copies of any articles I might write later. I returned to Cuba in 1988 with video copies of all the dances I researched. I also deposited copies of the dissertation and other articles with the Center for Research and Development of Cuban Music in Havana, as well as with the Casa del Caribe in Santiago de Cuba.

3. “Folklore” in Cuba refers to traditional items, particularly music, dance, art, furniture and costume, that come from a combination of European, African, and Haitian heritages which comprise the matrix of Cuban culture. Additionally, it refers to more recent patterns and material items, all, of which strongly emphasize a Cuban identity. Maria Teresa Linaris in *La música y el pueblo* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1989), 1-7 uses the term as both the products and legacies of the people which are transmitted orally and through imitation. Fernando Ortiz in *Los bailes y el teatro de los negros en el folklore de Cuba* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1951), 29-36 defines it as the products and behaviors of ordinary people, as well as, those of the more privileged strata of society. Both writers on Cuban folkloric music and dance emphasize that folklore comes from the upper as well as the lower classes, from the cities as well as the rural areas, and within contemporary times as well as in antiquity.


6. Dances related to rumba and the rumba complex are found throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, e.g., *samba* of Brazil, *bamba* of Mexico, *malambo* of Peru, *zembra* of Argentina, *colombia* of Colombia, *bandamban* of Suriname, as well as, *cumbia* of Puerto Rico. These dances generally involve flirtation, a chase and/or the approaching, thrusting or bumping of the pelvic area. For Cuba, see Olavo Alen, *Generos de la música cubana* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1984), 151-165.


According to the two authorities on Afro-Cuban folkloric traditions Fernando Ortiz (Bailes), 433 and Rogelio Martinez-Fure (La rumba, 1982), 114-115, it is possible that rumba began in Cuba as remembered fragments of songs and steps from the Ganga or Kisi people in Cuba. Janheinz Jahn suggests that the dance came from the Sara peoples of Northern Nigeria where rows of boys dance in front of rows of girls getting closer and closer until they touch and then separate from one another (Muntu), 82. In Cuba, however, yuka and makuta are rumba's antecedent dances. They are dances of Kongo-Angolan ancestry, i.e., the BaKongo, Luba, Lunda and undoubtedly other central African peoples from what are now Congo, Angola and Zaire. Cf. Lopez-Valdez, “African Ethnic Groups in Cuba” (unpublished paper, Stanford University presentation, April, 1989); Yvonne Daniel, Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Society (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); also Bunseki Fu-Kiau and Malonga Casquelourdes (p.c. 1989, 1991, 1992). Touching or bumping of the thighs, navel or pelvic areas among male and female dancers is characteristic of both yuka and makuta and prominent in rumba.

Manuel Moreno Fraginals, ed., Africa in Latin America: Essays on History, Culture, and Socialization (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1984: 1014) Male dancing could also be interpreted as an outlet for the expression of homosexuality, however, homosexuality is not a prominent feature nor an apparent issue when viewing this particular dance form.

In the present essay, “Creole” is treated as a new entity born or exhibited in Cuba from the mixture of African and European influence, but decidedly Cuban.

This particular weaving of separate complexes, i.e., rumba and Yoruba, is currently attributed to Pedro Tapanes (Pello) and Francisco Zamora of Afro-Cuba, a traditional performance group, although evidence in one of Celia Cruz’s songs indicates that such combinations occurred before (see Andy Gonzalez and Larry Birnbaum in Vernon Boggs’ Salsiology New York: Greenwood Press, 1992, 295). It follows the process of rumba development by taking elements of secular and sacred material in combination. Here, however, both the dance and the music systems make full combinations. Both types of drums are used simultaneously (congas and bata), both types of songs (rumba songs and Yoruba chants) and lyrics are sung alternately, and three types of dance forms are integrated alternately—rumba, Yoruba and casino (a dance similar to what is known in the United States as salsa dancing).

Son complex has a distinct battery of instruments, prominently including strings and brass, a general three part song form, a specific clave as rhythmic base (which is similar to rumba clave) and comprises many twentieth century social, popular dances, including mambo, chachacha, mozambique, casino, etc.

A contemporary form of son complex, often danced in a square or circle of couples with a caller for specific steps (e.g., rueda de casino).

The Ministry of Culture differentiates between professional and amateur dancers, however, they include traditional performers as amateurs. Traditional in this sense refers to dancers and musicians who have not trained formally in schools. I consider these traditional dancers professionals who are often masters in particular dance complexes and who serve as models and informantes for professional company members (see Daniel, Rumba).

I tried to secure interviews with Ministry officials to understand the workings of the Ministry in relation to directors of dance companies, the organization of traditional artists and true amateurs, as well as, the extent of ministerial influence on programming. My questions to five Ministry officials, several directors of dance and theater companies, many dancers and musicians and the Cuban people themselves were to ascertain whether the selection of rumba performers was from the top-down or down-up. The vast majority cited the National Folkloric Company as the initiator of professional rumba performance. I have concluded that this came about in both ways: from the administrative level down, but also from the people/workers’ level up (see Yvonne Daniel, “Economic Vitamins from the Cuban Aesthetic System or Commoditization and Cultural Conservation in Cuban Tourism,” in Tourism and Music: The World of Music, Vol. 10, Tomoaki Fujii, ed., Nobukiyo Eguchi, translator [Osaka, Japan:
Race, Gender, and Class in Cuban Dance

There is tremendous participation in ground level organization (i.e., people/workers (assembleas) by Cuban dancers and musicians where consensus must be obtained for efforts, trends, or programs to go forward. The workers are constrained, nevertheless, by national ideology, mass communication programming and peer pressure towards uniformity with official statements.

The emphasis to promote Rumba particularly began in the administrative level of the National Folkloric Dance Ensemble, specifically with Rogelio Martinez-Fure and Teresa Gonzalez, the ethnologist and director respectively. Their affinity for Afro-Cuban traditions and their professional interests in generally improving the National Folkloric Ensemble matched national objectives in cultural terms. Their suggestions and plans are approved by Ministry officials at the Programming level of organization.

For black perspectives from the U. S. and from Cuba on racism in Cuba today, see Gail McGarrity, in “Race, Culture and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba– in The Struggle for Revolutionary Transformation (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990) and Carlos Moore, Castro, the Blacks and Africa (Los Angeles: University of California Center for Afro-American Studies, 1989).

I lived among tourists and predominantly light-skinned Cubans for one month in Havana, 1985. In 1986, I returned to Cuba for a one year study, living for four months among light-skinned Cubans while working with mostly dark-skinned Cubans in Havana. After these four months, I began alternating between Havana and Matanzas, living and working among predominantly dark-skinned families. Interspersed in that year, I traveled to Santiago de Cuba, Camaguey and Holguin for short visits (1-2 weeks at a time) living among light-skinned Cubans and working among dark-skinned Cubans. On these shorter trips, my accommodations were often in tourist hotels, but my steady household arrangements in Cuba for that year were my Havana apartment (in a building for long-term foreign workers) and my second family’s household in the Matanzas marina, a predominantly black area. On subsequent visits in 1988, 1990, and 1993 I have lived in tourist accommodations while traveling between my Havana, Matanzas, and Santiago families, i.e., among predominantly dark-skinned Cubans.

My comments are guarded with regard to young, light-skinned Cubans. I lived much of my field experience among dark-skinned Cubans or within the folkloric dance community which is predominantly dark-skinned. I did not spend much time specifically among younger Cubans, especially light-skinned ones. Cuban society, however, is not so highly structured in terms of generational groups; all age groups are usually represented at most social events.


Guapo is courageous, valiant, bold, daring, resolute, enterprising, goodlooking, handsome, neat, elegant, ostentatious, vain or in another sense, a dandy or a bully. It is associated with the behavior of tough, street-wise men of the taverns, bars, ports, marinas and solares or the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is especially associated with los negros curros, free blacks and mulattos who wore a specific style of dress (very decorated, fancy and reminiscent of Rumba costuming today), spoke a particular dialect and were reputed to be very daring and challenging, even to the death (see Fernando Ortiz, Los negros curros (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1958).


http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol12/iss1/8