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# BLACKNESS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformations

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### 18. RUMBA

# Social and Aesthetic Change in Cuba

#### Yvonne Daniel

## Organic Change in Dance

Because dance involves the body as the tool of the art as well as the art product itself and because the body is part of a constantly shifting process of physical change, each performance of dance, each enactment of special movement, is subject to minuscule, incremental, or drastic change. While artistic directors, choreographers, and dancers at all levels of proficiency may strive to retain specific movements, replicate designs and an organization, or recreate feelings, the dance is constantly influenced, reinterpreted, and reformulated. As performers continuously embroider, emphasize, miniaturize, augment, crystallize, or spontaneously create nuances and embellishments, even while dancing within set sequences, slight changes occur that eventually develop and shape the dance as a whole. The dance product changes in the eyes of viewers, who have different understandings depending on their historical backgrounds, contemporary trends, and the immediate environment of the performance. Change, as a result, is a significant part of tradition, but it is a constant in dance.

Traditional dance is not static, therefore, but part of a dynamic process. This process is an ongoing one of selection, presentation, elimination, augmentation, and manipulation. Specific esteemed elements of movement, which are recognized within a given group from a given location and which characterize a style, complex, or tradition, are identified and given social value. In many ways, traditional dancers and performers of other traditional arts must work carefully to safeguard a particular style or form of the past. Aesthetic preferences and dance qualities evolve slowly (although sometimes "traditions" are not so old; see Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, and Homer, 1990, chap. 1). They are selected from many available cultural items; they come into being as "traditional dance," both through the molding of separate aesthetic elements into a structured form and through the incorporation of gradual change. Immediate or severe change is seen

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and felt as a violation of consensus, precepts, or rules. Traditional dance defines, traces, captures, projects, and enlivens a particular set of images and symbolizes ideas and attitudes that are culturally understood and generally agreed upon.

Cuban traditional dances negotiate delicately between the prescribed repetition of set music/dance sequences and necessary, natural, organic change. Cuban dance traditions that are performed daily as part of professional company rehearsals display the peculiar play between the unchanging and the changes of tradition. Cuban dancers and dance administrators limit and channel movement because of organic tendencies to vary and change. Daily repetition of esteemed dance patterns safeguards the dance structures but places the content, substance, or essence of dance in jeopardy of performance death.

Without change, performance can become deadly, dry, lacking in excitement. Lifelessness in dancing or music making often occurs when the performance is separated from the original purpose of the tradition. (Consequently, for the musical theater dancer, lifelessness due to repetition is not so serious a problem, since the dance purpose is intimately involved in its repeated performance.) If the dance is routinized by repeated practice away from its significant context, its vitality can dissolve; performance death can occur.

Professional Cuban dance companies alternate the performance of dance traditions to present dynamic entertainment and didactic artistry; however, they are still subject to the dangers of routinization and performance death. Even the use of informantes—the living archives of traditional dance—cannot always ignite the vivifying essence of dance in its original setting, nor always sustain freshness and vitality in performance (Martinez-Furé, 1986). While musicians and dancers remain the experiential librarians of varying traditions, it should be remembered that it is through their ever-changing bodies that scores are stored. Efforts to conserve dance traditions must acknowledge and incorporate change as an organic and vital component of dance.

#### Change in Rumba

As with other ethnic dance material, that is, dance that is connected in important ways to national or ethnic identity, such as the Mexican hat dance, Hawaiian hula, and Haitian Vodun dances, rumba's African and Spanish movement sequences connect powerful physicality and aesthetic stimulation to feelings regarding the Cuban nation and its people. Like other African-derived dance traditions, rumba incorporates other arts (music, drama, storytelling) and makes reference to aspects of social life within movement (see Primus, 1969; Wilson, 1981; and Nketia, 1965). The "consummate vitality" of African sculpture, according to Robert Farris Thompson (1974:1-48), and the "dynamism" of Surinamese carving, according to Sally and Richard Price (1980:166-87), are compounded and accentuated when applied to dance performance. Thompson identifies the characteristics that shape African performance, including its "getdown" quality, coolness, swing, flexibility, and ephebism. The Prices refer to performance among the Surinamers of African descent in terms of spontaneous expressions that are enculturated early and result in dynamic essence. Rumba has the same force or surge of physical energy. Its dynamism, or consummate vitality, is embodied in performers through the exertion of specified movement and is kinesthetically transferred to viewers. The physical demand on the body culminates in fatigue, but the body is deeply relaxed as a result of such a demand in dancing. The aesthetic force of rumba in combination with the physical release of tension govern its potency. Rumba focuses a multiplicity of stimulating elements; it overlaps phrasing and moments of emphasis and thereby creates suspension and dynamic interest within physical action. Such physical power and illocutionary force are the reasons for the continuity of Cuban rumba despite its mixed messages and political-economic appropriation.

Although few Cubans dance rumba well and those who do tend to be black or dark-skinned Cubans, rumba generates particular interest and draws special attention: it is treated like no other dance in Cuba. No other dance is accorded a one-two week festival in its honor. No other dance punctuates the calendar of events in casas de cultura programming. No other dance form within balletic, modern, or folkloric styles is exposed as much to international visitors. It is used strategically to display Cuban culture and to promote deep, fundamental change in values. Within non-Cuban contexts, it portrays a new Cuba in an artistic manner and encourages gradual change.

Rumba could be designated the Cuban national dance of the twentieth century, yet it competes with conga and son (see Daniel 1995, and Eyleshin, 1989). Of the three dances, conga is most easily performed by all ages and both sexes; thus it can be argued that conga is more communal. It is a group dance; everyone dances at the same time. Rumba, on the other hand, is the dance of a single couple or male soloist, dancing alone most of the time. Rumba is communal performance, while conga is communal participation. Even though conga is easier and more communal, rumba has received more official support.

Neither was the most popular, social, and historic dance, son (which continues as salsa in current North American terminology and as casino in contemporary Cuba), appropriated as the national dance of the twentieth century (Orozco, 1984:382-85). In light of its tremendous popularity as the most performed social or popular dance in Cuba, it is conceivable that most Cubans would select casino as the national dance. Apparently casino lacks something seminal to national objectives, as conga does also.

Rumba's prominence apparently was based on criteria other than ease, popularity, and communal participation. In a structured form, within specific spaces, and at particular times, rumba fulfills strategic goals. Analysis points to the fact that Cuban society has a preference for performance within a mass as opposed to mass performance. Rather than the mass participation of casino or the unstructured abandon in conga, rumba gives prepared culture to the masses; it provides

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education and values. Rather than a focus on the individualistic passing, turning, and designing of patterns in casino or a focus on the improvisational and unstructured activity of conga, rumba has emerged as a dance structure that coincides with socialist perspectives, a cultural symbol of social relations.

Meaning in rumba has varied consequences in terms of the dance and its performers. In the dance, there is a search for the vacunao, for possession of the female and community prestige. Dancers work at the search through the call and response acknowledged between dancers and drummers and through the exchange of movements between dancers (exchange of vibrating shoulder motifs, the series of responsorial actions in vacunao, turns, fake vacunaos, implosive holds). The meanings of rumba are not only possession of the female or winning the competition between males or between drummer and dancer but also prestige and status among rumberos, Cubans, and foreigners (see Graburn, 1976:49–51).

A more problematic meaning of rumba manipulation and appropriation, which is shared by other Cuban artists, is concern for artistic freedom, a parallel issue with routinization of performances but now in terms of performers. The dark-skinned or black rumbero still sings of liberation and is concerned with social dignity and personal artistic self-worth; however, where is artistic freedom in rumba as it is officially and most frequently presented? In Cuba there are few presentations of new ideas, new performance modes, or new creative dances and, until very recently, little social criticism. Artistic freedom is limited—that which would permit rumba to develop in the spontaneity of the moment and would be congruent with its original form. How will rumberos receive artistic stimulation to invent or fashion something new other than redundant prescribed messages, if rumba is always prepared? Routinization develops technique but stifles, if not suffocates, creativity in all artists.

Regard for artists entails more than providing a means for their personal welfare and performance or maintenance of techniques and performance technologies. It encompasses an ambiance of artistic freedom that generates creativity and requires attention to their notions of self-worth and dignity. Such an environment permits and encourages experimentation, growth, and acceptance or rejection of all sorts of ideas. In a striking manner, Sally Ness uses the image of a basketball that is held loosely but possessively as she analyzes sinulog dance and Filipino society in terms of looseness within a possessive relationship. She states that "basketball is a game about possession and control. However, its most important object, the ball itself, cannot be clutched firmly. It has to be released continually from any possessor's grasp" (1992:124). Cuban artists, particularly rumberos, need and deserve such a loose hold.

Rumberos represent not only Afro-Cubans but also fellow Cuban artists in the development of creativity and artistic freedom. Rumba signals a need for rectification of injustice to artists, certainly to rumberos and folkloric dancers. In this manner, rumba echoes human universals and basic aesthetic needs (Langer, 1953; Blacking, 1973; Hanna, 1979; Lewis, 1984).

Although artists were hesitant to discuss this point with me in 1986 and 1987, an article by Coco Fusco in the Nation suggests that conditions are changing:

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In contrast to tense moments in the past, when the official response was to redouble control, the current interest in and tacit approval of the younger generation are signs of the foresight and sensitivity of many in power. . . . Stylistically heterogeneous, this generation of artists has an unabashed interest in information about art outside Cuba. What unifies them even more than their artwork is their strong opposition to any reductive or repressive definition of revolutionary culture. (1988:399)

#### Change in Cuba

Although dance is not a specific priority within national objectives, it assists Cuba's commitment to self-determination, social equality, and collective solidarity as a small, independent nation. In Cuba, dance and all forms of expressive culture are used to support socialist ideology and egalitarian behavior. Within domestic organization and the international arena as well, national ideology emphasizes values that rectify historical hierarchy and dance can express such changes.

Cuban artists and expressive culture are exciting and powerful aids to political struggle and economic development. Throughout Cuba, the arts are celebrated; ample and active participation of the public in close dialogue with artists (painters, sculptors, and writers as well as dancers and choreographers) has been encouraged as part of governmental directives specific to the arts. Artists are a vital component of education programs via the casa de cultura system. In other words, the artistic community has been accessible to national efforts that inform the public of contemporary events, increase awareness, and develop consciousness of national goals. Through performance of national dance traditions, the construction of a new value base has been underlined; the use of the arts has been developed as a means of educating and reeducating the public toward government objectives and as a means of indoctrinating new values.

What rumba dance/music does irrespective of what people say or believe and irrespective of what the government intends is revealed both in the social currents and conditions of contemporary Cuba and in the dancing body, that is, in changing values and attitudes. A reformation is in process: of economic, political, and social circumstances on one hand and of sentiment, attitudes, ideology, and values on the other. By means of a well-established dance and the important sentiments and feelings that are generated within, around, and because of it, the gap between ideals and reality is perceivable and change can be initiated.

Rumba is well-established, identifiable, and successful over other dance forms in evoking elevated feelings that are necessary for symbols of national consequence. Rumba has emerged in postrevolutionary Cuba by means of three sociopolitical processes: politicization, commoditization, and secularization.

Through the examination of Rumba within these differing milieux, a model that investigates social change is established; rumba becomes an indicator or a test of change in Cuba.

While there are artistic reasons for promoting rumba (it makes a great finale, it can involve audience participation, it contains play, interest, and suspense), other reasons have instigated the special position of rumba in contemporary Cuba. One current comes from the top, within the Ministry of Culture and from arts administrators. As discussed, the ministry broadly organizes and outlines cultural activities toward the goals of the Revolution. Fidel Castro's framework for the arts has been the mission of the ministry, given succinctly in June 1961: "Inside the Revolution, everything; against it, nothing" (Matas, 1971:432–36). By means of financial, organizational, and ideological support, the ministry and arts administrators have been instrumental in the promotion of rumba and have determined its prominence among dance professionals and within the public.

Apart from the forceful persuasion of governmental support at the top, another current comes from the bottom, among sincere folkloric performers and the public at large. Folkloric dancers and musicians have enjoyed the new elevated status of folklore and have been eager to integrate the goals of the Revolution into their artistic lives. Dancers have put material into their choreographies and dance events that have been ignored previously and material that they consider relevant to their future. In 1980, Teresa Gonzalez and Rogelio Martinez-Furé received consensus among company members in the asamblea to support Rumba Saturday as a peak event. Folkloric and artistic contribution to contemporary Cuban history was validated and, from the bottom up, artists were instrumental in the emergence of rumba as a nationally promoted dance. The enthusiastic support of the public was important as well, and as a result of Cuba's cultural education programs, the general public accepted and echoed the elevation of rumba officially.

A third current of national concern comes from the international dance community (see Graburn, 1984:393, and 1986). The aesthetic power of rumba is that which mesmerizes the international dance community. Even though international dancers do not share the exact meanings of rumba with Cubans, they become involved through the reputation of rumba and are affected by the experience of rumba, the dance/music complex and Rumba, the dance event. International students and artists have seen and heard rumba as it has been promoted and professionalized lately, but also they have experienced Rumba throughout the world. Rumba Saturday's success did not go unnoticed.

Within Cuba before the Revolution, rumba had been widespread, spontaneous, and popular among dark-skinned or black Cubans. Rumba was not taken from these Cubans; they were not paid to perform a meaningless symbol. Instead the government paid Cubans within one segment of the population, who formerly danced rumba frequently yet intermittently, to perform it more frequently

for the entire nation. There is little resentment from those who formerly enjoyed rumba because rumba is still accessible to them—even more than before. Now it is prepared more frequently than ever and is showing small signs of growth in terms of popularity beyond the Afro-Cuban segment of society.

The larger segment of the population, which did not share the dancing, has been slow to take on new and previously lower-class values (cf., on the crisis of meaning, Hintzen, 1978:1–47). But the larger sector is learning how to dance rumba through its youth. Young persons of all colors are learning rumba in schools and casas de cultura all over Cuba. These young dancers and dance teachers participate in Rumba from time to time and teach the dance form to others. They are the white or lighter-skinned Cubans who join in the competition of columbia or who know how to deflect the vacunao in guaguancó. While there is still reluctance, the force of multivocalic rumba that has official support and ideological references yields its important position and demonstrates its potential.

Clifford Geertz (1973) says that art is interpretive, a story that participants tell themselves about themselves. In this case, rumba announces the class equality that the Revolution has sought to implement by featuring the former lower-class representatives; rumba is no longer confined to the barrio but is representative of the nation in community centers and theaters. Its illocutionary force projects and persuades its audience as well as its performers, so that the images, messages, or statements presented are usually unquestionable and inarguable and cannot be rejected. Rumba's overiding statements are concerned with social equality, national identity, and communitas.

The data presented show evidence of promotion, manipulation, and appropriation of rumba in order to elevate and conserve it as a cultural symbol. Professionalization of the form through dance company organization and proliferation of dance performances through casas de cultura organization have institutionalized rumba throughout the country. Meanings previously associated solely with the choreography are transformed to national interests and international demands. Racial and gender stratification that are discovered with analysis are subordinated under current issues of Cuban identity and women's liberation. Stimulated by national interests and international demands (including tourist demands and dance specialists' interests), the symbols within rumba are immersed in a reformation process. Rumba is the nexus of sensuality, solidarity, attraction, unity, and well-being, and ultimately it expresses the essence of postrevolutionary Cuba and its efforts toward egalitarian organization.

# Toward Change

When people experience bodily the dynamics of a dance/music event as it builds climactic segments and speeds toward a rhythmic and harmonic apex, they also experience sensations of well-being, pleasure, joy, fun, sex, spontaneity, tension, opposition, musicality, or simply human physicality. Cubans and non-

Cubans associate pleasurable feelings and sentiments with Rumba, and Rumba is capable of transforming their reality.

Among rumberos, social interconnectedness increases, diverse worldviews are meshed if not suspended, and differing degrees of social stratification unite in the liminal world created by the Rumba event. Rumba dancing provides what the Turners call "the structured, highly valued route [my emphasis] to a liminal world where the ideal is felt to be real, where the tainted social persona may be cleansed and renewed" (1978:30). Cubans and non-Cubans repeatedly acquaint themselves with the equality and social justice that the Rumba event suggests and primarily promotes. Equanimity is real, experienced bodily, in the liminal world of Rumba, and its extension into the social world seems possible. Rumba persists by means of its power to generate communitas and because of the fundamental, dynamic, and contagious nature of dance.

The occurrence, popularity, and understanding of Rumba are increasing and ever thriving among rumberos, Afro-Cubans, and international art market patrons; these attributes also are increasing gradually within the general Cuban population. There is continuity of meaning in the communitas no matter how the form changes or the timing shifts. Whether the form is yambú, guaguancó, columbia, or batarumba, Rumba means heightened sensitivity and communal fun. When the speed increases or decreases or when the duration is expanded or reduced, Rumba still focuses mainly on attraction, seduction, competition, and play. Even when the space changes from barrio to theater, the potential to generate communitas is intrinsic and ever present.

The intrinsic quality associated with communitas is within the nature and essence of dance. Not only does the eye or the ear bring excitation and ultimately understanding, but the entire human body, with all of its sensory receivers, does so too. The many sensory channels of dance mediate multiple meanings simultaneously. Meanings come from its origins in the nineteenth-century Cuban experience: a dance of lower-class Afro-Cubans expressing male and female attractiveness in rhythmic form. Simultaneously, other meanings are imposed from the social conditions of twentieth century Cuba: a dance of all Cubans expressing egalitarian goals. All meanings are embodied in the dance and are exposed fully only by means of detailed analysis.

The Cuban Ministry of Culture and folkloric empresas change the time and space of Rumba, but they count on the intensification of energy in rumba as the ultimate expression of communitas. The formal setting is transcended and often even unconcerned, disinterested, detached attitudes of musicians, dancers, or spectators are transformed and involved. Rumberos transform themselves and others as they create a sustained stream of pleasurable feelings or an explosion of pure emotion.

Organizers in postrevolutionary Cuba seek ways to develop a new orientation from the hierarchical past, ways that encourage communal interest and collective

involvement. Educators and managers of the arts attempt to attach the consistent and repeatable dance/music elements of Rumba to egalitarian meanings. Dance, and Rumba in particular, afford the exceptional possibility of a nexus between communitas and ideology, between feelings and goals. To the extent that white or mulatto Cubans participate in Rumba fully and enthusiastically with black or darker-skinned Cubans, that women dance columbia and dance less defensively in guaguancó, that Rumba Saturdays in Cuba and rumba workshops elsewhere generate foreign currency and prestige, that Rumba continues to embrace religious dance material, the complex process of changing values in Cuba can be identified and measured.

Rumba analysis reveals the contrasts and contradictions that exist in contemporary Cuban society. Rumba articulates social conditions: it illustrates socialist ideals as well as social control, machismo as well as women's liberation, sociological race as well as national identity. Rumba performance mediates contradictory issues: spontaneity, freedom, sensuality, and, simultaneously, structured form and set order. Cubans must evaluate all that rumba does and weigh the benefits to determine if it is sufficiently and effectively strategic as it now operates within Cuban society.

Rumba can and does assist ideology, but it can do more. Rumba has a potential for change that is intrinsically present. The potential is the communitas that it is capable of generating: a combination of dance—music elements that encourages a liminal state and consequent equanimous feelings. This potential makes rumba essential, not simply in reflecting social change but also in effecting social change.

Even though it is exceedingly difficult to change values and attitudes, it is not impossible. Rumba, in its prepared form, ignites communitas, but in its extended, spontaneous forms it sustains and maintains communitas even more. The encouragement of spontaneous Rumba events and the proliferation of spontaneity in prepared and extended Rumba would permit the organic development of a fundamental Cuban expression and would allow the resultant communitas to grow, to increase in intensity and in scale. More Cubans would potentially be susceptible to its liminal world of equality and equanimity and more Cubans and non-Cubans might be subject to attitude and value change. The organic emergence or resurgence of batarumba offers the possibility of more significant rumba performance and thus an increase in the efficacy of rumba as a national symbol.

#### A Rumba Portrait for the Future

The Rumba that is awaited is the congregational fiesta of Cuba and the United States. The clave has been sounded since independence came to the Americas—the insistent, persistent, resistant call of the people, the clave of Americans who speak Navajo, Cherokee, and Seminole languages, Spanish, French, Patois,

Papimiento, Taketake, English, Dutch, German, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Arabic, Hebrew, Farcsi. Their rhythm is rumba clave since they dance to a syncopated rhythm, suspending the "and" of beat four and tending to vibrate their shoulders adeptly, often on that beat alone. Cuba's conga has voiced its decorated ostinato in concepts of solidarity and sovereignty, followed by the seis por ocho of diplomatic maneuvers over three decades in order to generate equality as a founding principle of their social organization and of global relations. Castro's indefatigable efforts to fight against the inhumane principle of profit, the enunciating brass capitalist call around the world, have been heard as the virtuoso, improvisational quinto that smacks harshly and irregularly but ingeniously and with the ultimate of philosophic integrity. A small chorus in the United States has held a solitary madruga pulse as a democratic refrain, "liberty, freedom, equality," for the rhythmic preparation of new U.S. leadership. The guagua is the quick, busy, fleeting, but interested voice of young Cubans in Cuba who want the values of their homeland and relatives, but who also want experiences and discoveries afar. Their voice in the polyrhythmic layering, "ahora, rectificación," gives the rumba gas to progress and intensify on both sides. The displaced Cubans from south Florida and northern New Jersey to San Francisco are eligible estrofa singers who are daily creating verses of longing for their childhood homes and families, real congri nativo, and radical change. The main personages, the Cuban and United States government officials, are the long-awaited numberos. The rumba circle is prepared; why don't they dance the rumba of respect and interdependency together? It is only through cooperation that we will experience a less unfair and more equitable world.

In light of this study's conclusions, dance reveals its potency. It is because rumba is multivocalic, multisensory, multilayered, dynamic, lively, and full of spirit that it is able to effect all its meanings. More specialized neuropsychological data may give a tangible form to the route of rumba's communitas and articulate the elements that form its essense or determine which combinations permit a heightened, humane state to emerge.

Dance, as part of an aesthetic system, offers intangible but indelible results. The non-native may not share the same meaning of the dances with native performers, but with willingness to be aware and especially to dance, cultural understandings become more evident. In dancing rumba, Cubans and groups of unrelated, culturally plural people are drawn together in their distinctiveness.

I hope that Cubans will continue to conserve their folkloric dance forms and document and publish the resulting analyses. I hope that the information contained here will be of assistance in that effort as an outside perspective on rumba and that this study has communicated the concern I have for rumba, Cuban dance, and Cuba. I expect that the essence of rumba will resonate within its diverse audiences and that the communitas it generates will facilitate substantial change, hopefully from inequality to equality.

#### Note

1. The Cuban dances chart outlines many dances that I researched, but there are several others that I did not find adequately examined, e.g., the dances of Haitian-Cubans (babul, yuba, cate, tacona or mason), the Arará tradition (sollf, afrekete, gebioso, etc.), the dance of female societies (brikamo), the dance of spiritists (de Cordon), etc. As elsewhere, Cuba has a rich repository of dance information that can yield a deeper understanding of dance as universal and particular behavior.

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