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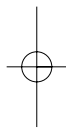
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**BARRIL
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SICÁ**



***Bomba* Dancing Crashes the Disco**

In March 1999, an unprecedented event took place in El Egipto, one of San Juan's swankiest *discotecas*. Invisible, subterranean, yet perceptible shockwaves were sent through the world of Puerto Rican music and dance. The event, a performance by an ensemble of relatively unknown *bomba* performers, a new group called Son del Batey, was neither announced nor reported, and it was snuck in after an evening of techno played by a DJ. As meek as its entrance was, it was nevertheless a ground-breaking performance, and I was lucky enough to be invited along as a guest member of Son del Batey, a group that I helped to organize as a *bomba* ethnographer during a 1998 postdoctoral research project at the University of Puerto Rico. Earlier in the year, we had been talking with José Emmanuelli, director of Bombazo de Puerto Rico (the flagship performing group of the CICRE research collective), about how great it would be to bring a traditional-style *bomba* ensemble into a dance club with lots of energy. While José was becoming more focused on organizing *bomba* dance events for larger, family-style venues such as municipal plazas, several of the original members of Bombazo de Puerto Rico (Pablo Rivera, Junito Febres, and others) split off from the group, in part to focus on engaging the younger generation in the night club scene. They formed Son del Batey. A couple of the group members had been on the folkloric circuit as adjuncts in the famed Cepeda Family, but none had performed in a night club before. All were a bit perturbed with the way that music of non-*boricua* origin dominated the airwaves and the nightlife on the Island. Why not *bomba*? Why not celebrate a genre with hundreds of years of history in Puerto Rico, arguably just as rich, if not more so, as other great Latin genres such as *merengue*, *son*, *rumba*, *samba*, etc.? One of the group members, "Pipo," turned out to have an acquaintance that worked at the club, and after getting approval from the club manager, they hoisted the *barriles* on their shoulders and marched in to set up. And they came prepared with a few songs of their own.

After a brief introductory segment, the group taunted the crowd with a familiar reggae beat on the *barriles* that Puerto Rican rappers had recently embraced in the form of *reggaetón* (dancehall reggae in Spanish, rapping over pan-Caribbean, Afro-diasporic beats). The club dancers were unaccustomed to hearing these beats played live, and a palpable sense of anticipation filled the air.

When Pablo Rivera sang the first verse over the reggae beat, "me dijeron que la bomba se habia muerto, pero no es la verdad" [They told me that *bomba* had died, but it's not true], the drummers answered with a break/*corte*—"tun, tun-tun, pa"—and followed with a change of direction, a breathless plunge into the popular *bomba sicá* rhythm. Then the chorus jumped in with the refrain/*coro*, "si no te gusta mi bomba, no te gusta mi país" [If you don't like my *bomba*, you don't like my country].

bomba y plena, a common local euphemism for “black people’s music” (for more on the problematic folklorization of this African presence, see Godreau 2002, 2003; Barton 1995, forthcoming). Although slavery was abolished in 1873 there remains, as in many parts of the Caribbean and the Americas, plenty of unfinished business regarding its legacy. The persistent denial, throughout many sectors of Puerto Rican society, of any social and contemporary value to the aesthetic principles and sources of memory, knowledge, validation, and theory that spring from Puerto Rico’s African heritage has ensured and perpetuated the ongoing, yet increasingly contested, marginalization of *baile de bomba*, a living example of Afroboricua collective historical creativity. That *bomba* has endured over four centuries, despite its relative obscurity, is also a sign of its power and its ultimate irrepressibility.

Rafael Cortijo had been the first to bring *bomba* rhythm into the ballrooms during the mambo craze of the 1950s. However, the characteristic dance aspect, *el reto* (the “challenge” between dancer and drummer), which is an integral and driving force of the music in its traditional setting, got left behind. So for the past fifty years at least, people have been using *son* and *merengue* steps to dance to *bomba* in the context of salsa performances by groups such as El Gran Combo and Willie Colón. For many Latin music lovers, *bomba* is salsa, whether or not *bomba* dancing is actually present. Rafael Cepeda had brought *bomba* dancing (*baile de bomba*) to the world over a long illustrious career spanning more than five decades, but the dance was presented in the form of a spectacle, a folkloric display in which the audience sat back and admired the action passively. The performance by Son del Batey at El Egipto, however, was not a *show*, not a concert, nor an *espectáculo*. There were no special costumes, no set choreography, nothing that would cater to those expectations where the audience and the performers are separated. There was no “preaching to the choir”—this was a street-style performance for people who knew nothing about *bomba* dancing.

For nine months prior to the Egipto performance, there had been a series of *bombazos*, or community *bomba* dances, initiated and sponsored by the Centro de Investigación Cultural Raíces Eternas (CICRE), a non-profit organization founded as my post-doctoral project in participatory action research, through the Rockefeller “Caribbean 2000” program based at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras. The CICRE name reflected a collaboration between myself, as a community action-oriented cultural anthropologist, and members of the folkloric group Raíces Eternas, led by the Emmanuelli brothers (Jorge, José and Víctor), Edgar Salamán, and Elia Cortés (who would later found the group Tamboricua). Raíces Eternas had its heyday in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but had gone dormant when the group director, Jorge, retired from performing and moved to Florida. My principal collaborator in the project, who introduced himself to me at the Rockefeller symposium, was the

The Egipto club, formerly Peggy Sue's, has since taken on yet another name, but its prime location in the heart of Santurce, the Parada 18 neighborhood, has not changed and is not far from where there had once been a thriving Afro-Caribbean presence. The area had been undergoing steady gentrification since the late 1950s and early '60s—once there had been a celebrated Carnaval here, before it was kicked out with the kiosks along what is now El Expreso Baldorioty, which runs along the lagoon of the former leper colony (turned tourist trap) called Condado.

At this venue, in circumstances brimming with irony, Son del Batey and the CICRE Bombazo Project had accomplished something that Mon Rivera, Rafael Cortijo, Ismael Rivera, and Rafael Cepeda—all unimpeachable champions and pioneers of Afroboricua music in public space—had sowed countless seeds for much of the past five decades but were unable to do in their lifetimes: to bring *bomba* dancing directly to the youth of Puerto Rico without the mediations, crutches, props, and machineries of folkloric discourse or commercial salsa.

Within a year of the Egipto performance, on the heels of an August 1998 performance by Bombazo de Puerto Rico at La Rumba Club in Old San Juan, Son del Batey got a steady gig on Sunday nights at La Rumba Club. The show has now been running for three years and counting.

In short, the intervention in Egipto was an event where Afro-Latin dance enthusiasts were reaching out to each other as peers in the enjoyment of the music but were comically, and somewhat tragically, unable to find a common ground, that is, a *soberao*, that would be acknowledged, understood, supported, and respected. For myself as a *bomba* performer and educator, it was yet more proof of the need to take *bomba* dancing into wider circles of public participation, on its own terms, before the dancers at a place like Egipto would understand how to respond, how to build a *soberao* for *bomba*.

A Challenge for Puerto Rican Music:

How to Build a *Soberao* for *Bomba*

The question of how to build the *soberao* is inextricably connected to various issues (*retos* or “challenges”) that are simultaneously practical, aesthetic, economic, historical, and political. The overriding concern is the practical/activist question of how to build community while resisting both ever-present tendencies toward commodification (“selling out”) and *cabildo*-formation (“building walls of secrecy”). All of the challenges discussed in this essay—practical, aesthetic, economic, historical, and political—are complex and interconnected, and each one is deserving of further consideration and development. While an in-depth discussion of each one of these issues is outside the scope of this article, we can make a preliminary sketch here of the task at hand. My purpose in this essay is to provide an overview of what

First of all, the basic step: for each of the four main rhythm complexes (according to the Santurce lexicon, these are *sicá*, *cuembé*, *yubá*, *holandés*), there is at least one basic step. In the *sicá* rhythm, for example, the basic step consists of a stylized walk, alternating arms with a toe-touch on each step forward. This basic step is generally used before and after the solo (*reto*), by an individual or in pairs, as part of the *paseo*, or promenade, where the dancer leisurely strolls around the dance circle in front of the lead drummer and makes eye contact to get their attention. Next comes the *ponche* (“punch” or icebreaker), a sharp, forceful movement that marks the end of the *paseo* and beginning of the *reto*, the “challenge,” made up of combinations of *piquetes* (improvised movements, markable by a competent drummer). There is considerable freedom among dancers to do whatever *piquetes* they choose as long as they follow the cardinal rules of *figura*, *firmeza*, y *elegancia*, which stipulate that the dance steps paint “figures” with firmness and elegance. The primary goal of the dancer is to capture and hold the drummer’s attention, and then (in most situations, depending on the rhythm) raise the intensity of the music (*subir el ritmo*) by executing a crescendo of increasingly intricate movement combinations that gradually escalate the challenge to the lead drummer. Experienced dancers make a habit of finishing off the challenge at the highest peak of intensity they can achieve, i.e., before they get too tired and/or let the rhythm drop.

The Aesthetic Challenge:

How to Maintain Artistic Quality and Cultural Integrity

In several respects, building the *soberao* is not difficult to the extent that the public can sing along with or chant refrains that are part of the call-and-response structure of *bomba* music. Many of the basic rhythms are simple enough that a skilled percussionist could learn them in a few hours. Also, many of the dance steps (*paseos*) that correspond to particular rhythms are simple enough that anyone who can walk in time to a beat will have no trouble jumping in and following along. At the most elemental level, *bomba* can enable and encourage the active participation of large numbers of people in ways that are accessible to most people with any talent for music and dance. But here is where the relative simplicity ends.

At deeper levels of participation, *bomba* involves several layers of improvisation that, in peak performances, dialogically interact and engage with one another (e.g., *bailando la melodía o la canción*, dancing the melody or the song), culminating in the expression of *hablar bomba* (to talk *bomba*) through percussive movement and sound. Yet there can be a fine line between what is understood by the *bomba* community as “improvising with integrity” versus being careless, sloppy, or inappropriate, the crossroad between what the Emmanuellis and other *bomberos* call *evolución* (a positive change in artistic direction) and *distorción* (a negative change).

(which are not entirely non-commercial, see below), the dances were sponsored by the owners and patrons of bars whose explicit purpose was to make money from the sale of alcoholic beverages and snacks, as well as receiving cash for the coin-operated jukebox, cigarette machine, pool table, etc.

Dufrasne recounts how his informants experienced these changes:

Don Francisco Montes Sabater tells us that they used to dance only in pairs, in rows and in a circle. The hand contact between ladies and gentlemen was very sporadic. Don Francisco says that the execution of the dance and music of *bomba* was very different from the interpretations of the Ayala Brothers and the Cepeda Family. He finds the music of these groups “very unruly” and that *bomba* dance as he knew it in his childhood was “very decent” and *de figura* (elegant, composed). This informant added that he couldn’t consider the music of these other groups as *bomba* (1985: 161–2 — author’s translation).

The theme of degeneration, decay, and dissolution is a common one running throughout this work, similar in tone to Eduardo Seda Bonilla’s *Requiem para una cultura* (1972). As a requiem for *bomba*,

It is important to consider the fact of the commercialization of *bomba* dance. The ones that own the drums and that pay the musicians are business-minded people. This justifies their presence during the musical events, as a consequence of their work or business interests. The *bomba* dances in Loíza are offered on lots adjacent to commercial establishments and openly sponsored by local business owners. Before this phenomenon, *bomba* was sponsored by particular individuals who cleared out a space for them around their houses. These non-commercial neighbors were present as the deans of the musical event, because the sale of alcoholic drinks under the roof of their house would have required their attention. They would have to be there for the commercial

will it be the more commercially oriented *salseros*, *merengueros*, and *raperos*, who assimilate superficial fragments of *bomba* performance by using a particular rhythm associated with traditional *bomba* and appropriating the *bomba* name for its marketability (its explosive, pyrotechnic “sex bomb” connotations)? While exploitation is unfortunately the norm, there have been several recent cases of inspired collaborations between commercially successful artists (such as the jazz trombonist, William Cepeda, and the rapper, Tego Calderón) and *bomberos* on the basis of mutual self-respect, but these cases tend to be the exception rather than the rule. The question remains: at what point and under what conditions will *bomberos* themselves be able get to determine what counts as “*bomba*” for a public that has been misinformed for so many years. On many levels, there is no question that the concept of authenticity is still locally important because it designates sites of struggle with broad social implications: authenticity is a place where opposing social forces meet. All in all, however, concepts of authenticity and artistic purity (especially to the extent that they are taken out of context) are just not very useful. The obsession with purity, and the quest for total authenticity, can even actively inhibit the development of a progressive social agenda that limits, diminishes and/or eliminates the exploitation of artists and performers. This insistence on artistic purity can also alienate first-timers, who receive the impression that only the ones who already know how may dance, and that there is only one correct way to participate.

The Historical Challenge:

How to “Make History” Through Collective, Creative Activity; How to Reorganize, Renew, and Reinvigorate the Entire Realm of *Bomba* Traditions and the Social Contexts That Support Them.

In the early 21st century, as Puerto Rican society continues to assert collective autonomy and self-determination on issues such as the liberation of Vieques from U.S. naval bombardment, the task at hand for *bomberos* is to take *bomba* where it has never been before, to fortify its support within Puerto Rican society and widen the circle of appreciation and participation—*para afinicar, sembrar, y cosechar*. The degree to which this task is difficult to achieve will have something to do with the social status of *bomba*, and the communities that have supported it, in Puerto Rican history. It will also be important to consider where *bomba* has come from and what *bomba* has been, and what *bomba* communities around the Island have done with it. There are historical and regional continuities as well as discontinuities that must be accounted for if some paths for *bomba*’s future development are to be illuminated.

The roots that *bomba* laid down during the slavery period had little to do with putting on a good show. According to Rafael Cepeda, in the recent Singer and James film, and many other oral historians of *bomba* traditions, *bomba* performers were rarely if ever paid for their services to the community. People played for the intrinsic

- **CALL-AND-RESPONSE SINGING:** mostly in Spanish, but some in Afro-French *kreyol* and some in Congolese (Alex LaSalle, personal communication); sometimes with an opening litany (as in some songs from Mayagüez, e.g. “Sepulate” by Don Félix Alduén); the refrains that are repeated tend to be rather short and suggestive and have a percussive, chant-like quality, often using simple melodies on a pentatonic scale and may, or may not, include vocal harmonizing.
- **POLIRHYTHMIC DRUMMING:** in variants of 2/4, 4/4, 6/8, and 12/8, with interlocking and multilayered rhythms formed by the three-part basic instrumentation and the percussive call-and-response vocal ensemble.
- **THREE-PART BASIC INSTRUMENTATION:** (1) at least two goat-skin barrel drums, including at least one *buleador* (low drum), which repeats a rhythmic phrase, and one *subidor* or *primo* (high drum), which improvises on top of, and in conversation with, the basic rhythm played by the *buleador*; the *subidor* is also used to sonically interpret a solo dancer’s movements;(2) one *cuá*, or stick drum, using two sticks on a hollow bamboo log or on the side of a drum, usually playing a pattern that corresponds to the basic rhythm of the *buleador*; (3) one large gourd maraca.
- **DANCE STEPS:** (1) distinct *paseo*, or promenade, steps that correspond to the basic rhythm being played; for dancing in pairs or groups or chorus line, without calling for beats from the *subidor*; (2) *piquetes*, improvised steps and gestures that call for beats to be precisely marked by the *subidor*; (3) all dance steps, whether improvised or codified by rhythm, must display the basic values of good posture, elegance, and firmness (three values somewhat open to interpretation and in the eyes of the beholder, and thus open to controversy).
- **THE DRUM-DANCE CHALLENGE OR RETO:** at virtually any moment in a *bomba* dance event a solo dancer may break off from the rest of the group or ensemble and approach the *subidor* to begin doing *piquetes*, improvised steps that call for particular beats and sound combinations to be marked on the drum by the *subidor*. The challenge for the drummer is to mark these steps by reading the body language of the dancer without knowing what the dancer is going to do in advance. The challenge for the dancer in this “agonistic dialogue” (Barton 1995; forthcoming) is to get and hold the drummer’s attention and increase the challenge by executing steps that progressively increase the overall energy and vitality of the musical ensemble, and then end the challenge at the highest peak of intensity, reverting to the basic step.

In addition to basic rhythmic patterns and the constants listed above, there are African traits in *bomba* performance that continue to suggest a linguistic base, however distant. To begin with, the local, creole Puerto Rican Spanish is loaded with Africanisms (in its vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, etc.; see Dufrasne

unlike every other Antillean country in the 19th century, with the exception of post-revolutionary Haiti (Knight 1990). The free black creole population that embraced *bomba* as a form of recreation in the 18th and 19th centuries was thus already culturally diverse and not restricted to one particular ethnic group (such as the Congolese). Puerto Rico's large population of free people of color also celebrated *bomba* as predominantly monolingual Spanish-speakers.

Thus two tendencies that continue today emerged in *bomba* during the 19th century. One is the more underground, sacred, sheltered or secretive side of *bomba*, which is entwined with Kongo-based culture and spirituality (as in the variety of *palo* religions), in which subtle meanings are retained through song and dance and passed on through religious rites and ceremonies into which one must be initiated in order to grasp their full meaning. The other tendency, arguably just as authentic and hundreds of years old, is the overtly secular, public face of *bomba*, understood to be recreational as well as defiant, Puerto Rican creole as well as African, practiced by slaves and their descendents as well as by free people of color and their descendents.

One could argue that *bomba* may have once had the capacity to literally “denote” in a particular African tonal language, but then lost this capacity when the original population of initiates, who knew the hidden meanings of its beats and tones, had passed on. Remarkably, rather than disappear in the 19th century after slavery became outlawed, *bomba* instead carried on a double life (sacred/secular, private/public) and was transformed into a “living border” (Flores 1993: 199–224), a musical dance language comparable to the role played by slang today. In this way, marginalized slaves and their black-identified working-class allies became insiders while slaveholders, and their *blanquito* allies were relegated to the outskirts of *bomba*, an invisible barricade, or “picket” line (of *piquetes*), that protected the community of those “in the know.”

Nowadays, perhaps more than ever, to “know” *bomba* (how to play it and sing it) is to know how to *dance bomba*. This trait also displays traces of its origins: in West African societies it is common that one must know the dance in order to claim that one knows the music (Waterman 1952). *Bomba* has gone even further in this direction, having recoded its entire tonal lexicon onto the body—anything that can be danced must be markable by the *primo*, and anything the *primo* plays must be danceable in the *bomba* idiom. While many West African and Afro-Caribbean dances have a family resemblance to this drum-dance dialogue, the intensity with which Puerto Rican *bomba* performers engage in the duel between sound and movement is arguably unique and a product of a particular cultural history that has never been duplicated.

**The Political Challenge:
How to Build a Community That Supports the *Bombazo* activity,**

a certain *cimarrón* consciousness alive in refusing to allow identity, social mobility, and cultural spaces to be defined by outsiders. Part of this maroon consciousness (*cimarronaje*) thrives in the roadside kiosks where crab-stuffed fritters and coconut water are sold along the island's coastal highways, calling to mind the diet of fugitive slaves who fled for the mangrove thickets to escape bondage and subsisted on crabmeat (*los cangrejeros*). This deep-fried *chinchorro* culture (see Santos-Febres 1991) has been on the run for most of the past thirty years, pushed farther and farther away from population centers in order to make room for more strip malls. Meanwhile, local elites (*los blanquitos*) continue to form and expand their gated communities; most only tolerate *bomba* as a static form of picturesque folkloric demonstration on a stage (i.e., as domestic tourism), not as a participatory street-level rite of community celebration. At the same time, television advertisers and commercial publicity firms continue to gleefully capitalize on the kiosk motifs to sell all kinds of products evoking "traditional" appeal (Dávila 1997). One of the great challenges (*retos*) facing the bomba community today is whether it can continue to cultivate the entrepreneurial *cimarron* consciousness that gave rise to the kiosks in the first place.



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