

The Vibrant Rhythms and Cultural Fusion of Bomba: A Celebration of Afro-Puerto Rican Heritage

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In recent years, the beautiful island of Puerto Rico has captured the attention of people worldwide. Often depicted as a tropical haven and the homeland of renowned artists like Bad Bunny and Daddy Yankee, this island holds a story that often goes untold. Where influences from West African roots intertwine with indigenous traditions and Spanish heritage, this cultural fusion births a narrative unique to Puerto Rico; providing a deeper purpose to the island and its people. At the heart of this narrative lies Bomba, a traditional dance form that serves as both a testament to the island's history and a celebration of its resilience.

The origins of Bomba date back to the era of transatlantic enslavement, where West Africans were enslaved and shipped to the shores of Caribbean islands like Puerto Rico, bringing with them their culture, heritage and customs. To many of those forced into a life of enslavement, Bomba was utilized as a tool for self expression; cultivating a story of survival, resistance and cultural preservation. Despite the adversity Bomba faced during this time period, it has evolved into a very significant part of Puerto Rican culture that still thrives in Puerto Rican communities today.

This paper aims to unpack the intricate history and significance of Puerto Rican Bomba, exploring its West African roots and tracing them back to modern day Puerto Rico. The creation and evolution of Bomba celebrates a history and legacy of resilience that encompasses the island of Puerto Rico today.

Bomba stands as one of the oldest musical traditions on the island, as noted by Vimari Colón-León, professor at Bridgewater College who has extensively researched its history. Colón-León asserts that Bomba traces its roots back to the early Spanish colonial period (1493–1898), emerging from the creativity of West African natives and their descendants who worked in the sugar plantations along Puerto Rico's coast. The transatlantic enslavement period saw the forced migration of countless West Africans to various Caribbean islands, including Puerto Rico, known as Borikén before Spanish colonization. Originally inhabited by the Taino people, the island underwent significant cultural upheaval during Spanish colonization (1493-1898), with the Taino population subjected to cultural erasure and exploitation. Both Taino natives and West Africans were consigned to rigorous labor on sugar plantations, enduring inhumane conditions. However, amid such adversity, Bomba emerged as a powerful movement, embodying resilience and becoming an integral part of Puerto Rican history.

In this paper I aim to delve into three integral components of Bomba: instrumentation, lyrics, and dance. The captivating beating of drums defining Bomba's traditional sound were introduced by enslaved West Africans brought to Puerto Rico during the colonial period. In the documentary "Why Puerto Rican Bomba Music Is Resistance," discusses the instrumentation and reveals how the barrels of tea or rum brought by ships carrying enslaved individuals were repurposed into drums. Known as "Baril" in Spanish, these barrels served as the driving pulse of Bomba music. Typically, two drummers are present in Bomba performances. The lead drummer, also called the "Primo" or "Subidor," plays a higher-pitched Baril, while the secondary drummer, known as the "Buleador," maintains a steady tempo (Why Puerto Rican Bomba Music Is Resistance, 2020.)

Additionally, Bomba incorporates Maracas, influenced by the Taino culture, to provide a rhythmic backdrop. Wooden drum sticks, known as "Cua," are also utilized alongside the Baril or on separate wooden surfaces. Despite the evolution of Bomba, these three instruments remain essential for producing its traditional sound.

Since the beginning of Bomba, a variety of dance styles and rhythms have been created throughout the years. The three most recognizable styles of Bomba are *Sicá*, *Yubá*, and *Holandés*.

- **Sicá:** The rhythm of Sicá is described as the slowest of the three main styles often associated with more sensual movements coming at the beginning of the dance narrative (Bomba Dance Guide, 2021.)
- **Yubá:** The rhythm of Yubá is associated with aggressive, powerful dance displays, as well as sadness and intensity (Bomba Dance Guide, 2021.)
- **Holandés:** The rhythm of Holandés is typically used in order to end a Bomba Dance, consisting of a faster and more upbeat syncopated rhythm (Bomba Dance Guide, 2021.)

I was able to experience these different styles of Bomba first hand as I worked closely alongside Puerto Rican dance company, Tradición. Tradición was established in 2016 by Puerto Rican salsa instructor, Angel Rodriguez, in order to share and celebrate traditional music, dance and dress attire from Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries. I was able to learn Bomba through Tradición and found that the different variations of Bomba each consisted of their own respected style of dance.

The movements of Sicá involve sensual hip movements, subtle footwork and graceful arm gestures. Holandé, on the other hand, features dynamic movements with quick footwork and

rhythmic body motions that synchronize with the music beat. In contrast, Yubá exhibits a heavier and more assertive choreography, emphasizing footwork by stomping and pounding on the ground in rhythm with the music. Despite their differences, all these variations are utilized for self-expression and communication among dancers.

Within Yubá, dancers employ a unique aspect known as ‘piquetes.’ Piquetes can be described as “when a dancer is about to engage in a dialogue with the lead drummer and waits for its turn.” (Colón-León) During this exchange, the dancer clears the dance space, also known as the ‘Batey,’ and challenges the lead drummer or ‘Primo.’ Piquetes are improvised dances where a dancer adopts a sense of resistance; sharing a story, idea or experience through the dancer's body (A Dance of Resistance, 2023.) These dances served as a powerful tool for communication between enslaved communities and as an outlet to express themselves in a world where they have been oppressed.

The integration of lyrics and dance in Bomba music played a pivotal role in transforming it into a powerful tool for protest, rebellion, and self-expression. Colón-León describes the importance of lyrical Bomba stating “Call and response is a fundamental ingredient of bomba. Musical performances typically start with a soloist called the *laina*, singing a phrase to which a group of singers responds.” Call and response serves as a way to emphasize the broader message of the song and during the period of enslavement, many Taino and Africans incorporated messages of solidarity and activism. An article published in The Smithsonian Institution newsletter titled “Puerto Rican Bomba and Plena,” shared that “lyrics conveyed a sense of anger and sadness about their condition, and songs served as a catalyst for rebellions and uprisings.” These songs served as more than just artistic expression; they became a powerful driving force

for rebellions and uprisings, providing a voice for the oppressed and fueling movements for social change.

Bomba stands as a testament to the resilience and vibrancy of Afro-Puerto Rican heritage. As we reflect on its rich history and cultural significance, we recognize Bomba's enduring legacy as a beacon of identity and pride. In Puerto Rican society, Bomba continues to captivate and inspire, serving as a bridge between the past and the future, and inviting further exploration and appreciation of Afro-Puerto Rican culture.

Annotated Bibliography

Colón-León, Vimari. "Bomba: The Sound of Puerto Rico's African Heritage." *General Music Today*, vol. 34, no. 3, Apr. 2021, pp. 13–19.

This article discusses the origin of Bomba, traditional music from Puerto Rico. Bomba dates back to the 18th and 19th century during the Spanish colonization and arrival of west african slaves to the caribbean. Bomba was created by the slaves as a way to express their anger and grief but also as a form of resistance and protest. Bomba has remained a well known music and sound in Puerto Rico today and is also accompanied by traditional dance.

Earth, Phonic, director. *YouTube*, 6 Jan. 2015, youtu.be/VItcQEbiQYs?feature=shared.

This documentary shares the sound of the traditional music of Puerto Rico; Bomba, Plena and Jibara. The documentary is split up into three different segments to discuss each respective music history. This documentary explores each category by traveling to different cities of Puerto Rico and sharing how each traditional piece of music is performed. The documentary also shares the origin of these pieces and how they have managed to still be known throughout the centuries.

Hall, Carnegie. "Lesson 1: Learning 'Estoy Buscando Un Árbol.'" *Carnegiehall.Org*,
[www.carnegiehall.org/Education/Programs/Musical-Explorers/Digital/Program-Four/
Juan-and-Julia/Lesson-1](http://www.carnegiehall.org/Education/Programs/Musical-Explorers/Digital/Program-Four/Juan-and-Julia/Lesson-1).

This video lesson teaches you the basic rhythms of Bomba and one of the many ways it is sung. In this video they use the song "Estoy Buscando Un Árbol" and share the different instruments used to play this piece. Other than instrumentals, Bomba also requires traditional dance which is later shown in the video. The performer in the video, Julia, teaches the basic footwork of Bomba but later expresses that a lot of traditional Bomba is improvised by the dancer using the beat of the drum.

Smithsonian Folkways. "Puerto Rican Bomba y Plena: Shared Traditions, Distinct Rhythms."

Smithsonian Folkways Magazine. Accessed at folkwaysSIPRBomba.com

This source, from Smithsonian Folkways, explores the cultural significance and distinctive rhythms of Puerto Rican Bomba and Plena music. It delves into the shared traditions and historical contexts of these musical genres, highlighting their unique rhythmic complexities and expressive qualities. The article offers valuable insights into the cultural heritage and identity of Puerto Rico through its exploration of Bomba and Plena, providing a comprehensive overview of these rich and vibrant musical traditions.

LSU Scholarly Repository. "A Dance of Resistance."

LSUMaster'sTheses. Accessed at

https://repository.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6966&context=gradschool_theses

The paper delves into the intersection of dance and resistance, delving into how various dance forms have been utilized as tools for challenging social norms, political oppression, and cultural

hegemony. It likely discusses specific examples of dances or dance movements that have served as acts of resistance, exploring their historical and cultural contexts. The paper may also examine the ways in which dance empowers individuals or communities to express dissent, assert identity, and advocate for social change.

MasterClass. "Bomba Dance Guide." MasterClass Articles. Accessed at

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/bomba-dance-guide>

This source is an article from MasterClass providing a guide to Bomba dance. Offering insights into the history, techniques, and cultural significance of Bomba, providing valuable information for those interested in learning about this traditional dance form.

National Association for Music Education (NAfME). "Bomba: The Sound of Puerto Rico's African Heritage." NAfME Blog. Accessed at

<https://nafme.org/blog/bomba-the-sound-of-puerto-ricos-african-heritage/>

This source from the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) explores Bomba, a musical genre deeply rooted in Puerto Rico's African heritage. It discusses the history, cultural significance, and musical elements of Bomba, highlighting its role as a form of cultural expression and resistance. The article provides insights into the rhythmic complexities and performance practices of Bomba, offering a valuable resource for understanding the rich musical traditions of Puerto Rico.

Viera-Vargas, Hugo R. "Race & Nation in Puerto Rican Folklore: Franz Boas and John Alden Mason in Puerto Rico, by Rafael Ocasio". *New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 95.3-4 (2021): 353-354. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134360-09503048> Web.

This article explores anthropological studies by John Alden Mason and Franz Boas in early 20th-century Puerto Rico. Rafael Ocasio analyzes Mason's fieldwork under Boas's guidance, considering the island's social and political context. The book provides insights into Mason's research methods, challenges faced, and its contribution to understanding marginalized communities. While focusing primarily on Mason, it also touches on Boas's work.