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To cite this article: Francesca Negro (05 Apr 2024): Tumba Francesa: Kinetic and linguistic archive of the African diaspora, Atlantic Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14788810.2024.2333155](https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2024.2333155)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2024.2333155>



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Published online: 05 Apr 2024.



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# Tumba Francesa: Kinetic and linguistic archive of the African diaspora

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## ABSTRACT

Declared an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO, Tumba Francesa is a cultural manifestation brought to Cuba with the Haitian revolution (1789–1805) incorporating the kinetic vocabulary of European court dances as well as different elements of African origin. It represents a memorial archive which includes dance, music, religion, and language in their transit from Africa to Haiti and then to Cuba, passing through the codes of European court dances. The lyrics of the songs develop from a *Kreyòl* base into a complex *patois*, while dance and music also develop from a ritual code into a syncretic court dance. This study will reinforce the importance of oral culture, as the study of performing culture in the Caribbean allows us to tell stories that belong to “the realm of the beyond” (Bhabha) that belong to those who could not speak, and that official history would not tell.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 October 2021  
Accepted 18 March 2024

## KEYWORDS

Tumba Francesa; Cuba;  
dance; creolization;  
transculturation; Kreyòl

This study is the result of field research carried out in Santiago de Cuba between 2017 and 2019 as part of a more comprehensive investigation into the performative cultural heritage of African origin in Cuba. Such work is published under the title *Deuses em cena. A teatralização das danças religiosas de origem africana em Cuba*.<sup>1</sup> It synthesizes a specific part of said research that was not included in the volume, and that has been developed with a view to analyze the aesthetic and social value of Afro-Cuban dances in the Eastern region of the island.<sup>2</sup> I outline the development of the cultural phenomenon and dance form known as the Tumba Francesa to trace the various stages of its development and its role as a linguistic archive.

Declared an Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008 in the context of UNESCO’s Slave Root Project, Tumba Francesa consists of African music, singing, and dancing. Tumba Francesa eventually reached Cuba via the island of Haiti. Originating from enslaved people, this dance was brought to Cuba with the Haitian revolution (1789–1805) and incorporates the kinetic vocabulary of European court dances. Tumba Francesa remained alive on the Island by means of the coexistence of members on festive occasions, as well as different already merged elements of African origin, thereby creating a syncretic performative

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phenomenon in Haiti in the seventeenth century. In Cuba, the dance settled in the Eastern regions of the Island, where a great number French colonizers arrived with their families and enslaved people trying to transfer their coffee crops to the new island after being exiled from Saint Domingue. Tumba Francesa is currently performed exclusively in three areas in Cuba: Santiago, Guantanamo, and Bejuco (district of Ságua de Tanamo). Bejuco is a very small and isolated village located in the province of Holguín, where performers nowadays just go to accomplish specific performance requests; the practice is in serious risk of disappearing as a result. Santiago's Tumba Francesa society, *La Caridad de Oriente*, still directed by the founders' family and renowned for its faithfulness to the musical and kinetic tradition, represents one of the main nucleus for this cultural practice. However, the dance is now performed primarily during festive occasions and for tourists, facing severe difficulties in finding young practitioners. Guantanamo's *Tumba Francesa Pompadour – Santa Catalina de Ricci* has been the recreational society officially named by UNESCO to represent this cultural phenomenon. Nonetheless, the group engages less in impromptu performances since then, and have required assistance from Havana's Escuela Nacional de Artes who have occasionally intervened in the choreographic process. These societies of Tumba Francesa are the only three that survived among the many that existed in the Cuban Eastern region; all of them have the same structure with a *Director* and a *Reina* (queen) or *Directora*. Such titles mirror the ones previously used in the *cabildos de nación*<sup>3</sup> – the colonial institutions from which these societies probably derive.<sup>4</sup>

Observing this phenomenon through the perspective of oral memory, we must consider the tangible register in Tumba Francesa and its performative cultural and artistic practices. While addressing this type of artistic language, I adopt a perspective presented by Marianne Hirsch with the introduction of the concept of *postmemory*, which she uses to describe the transmission of legacy from generation to generation through memories, which she studied in relation to the holocaust.<sup>5</sup> In this particular context, this concept applies to the memory of slavery and to the religious legacy, which, through oral memory and its semiotic representation in performative gestures, transcends repression, censorship, as well as spatial and temporal barriers. Still within this context, I recall the concept of the body as a "floating signifier," introduced by Claude Levi Strauss in his preface to Marcel Mauss' works,<sup>6</sup> as well as the idea that gestures are the incorporated wisdom of a given society, integrate their own functionality, and can be transferred to the symbolic level of expression and self-representation. Moreover, I agree with Alain Badiou's perception of "dance as an essentially cognitive action that comes before logical thinking":<sup>7</sup> an implicit functionality used to educate the body to resist life-imposed automatisms, both physical and spiritual, and therefore as a collective self-narrative encompassing both the dimensions of reality and of desire.

In Tumba Francesa, we find three types of cultural memory that remains active thanks to its sustained practice:

- Gestural memory: Gestures performed as part of the work carried out on coffee farms, but also the propitiatory religious gestures present in the dances and converging in this creole vernacular dance.
- Musical memory: Represented by the religious rhythms converging in this performative form, including the preservation of the instruments connected to the original religions of these social clusters.

- Linguistic memory: Mainly that of the Haitian *Kreyòl*, which is also officially the religious language used in voodoo rites.<sup>8</sup>

On all levels, Tumba Francesa acts as an instrument of expression and as a meeting place for individual and collective memories – where somatic heritage and various manifestations of verbal knowledge crystallized in practices become dynamic environments for identity construction.

## Dance and gestural memory

As preserved by the *Caridad de Oriente* association in Santiago and as executed in Guantanamo and Bejuco, Tumba Francesa is a complex phenomenon including different dance sections, executed consecutively. The currently existing structure of Tumba Francesa is composed of four distinct dance moments: the *Masón*, the *Yubá*, the *Frente*, and the normally closing *Tajona*.<sup>9</sup> The *Frente* is considered part of the *Yubá* and is the most frenetic section, which is more directly linked to African codes in terms of rhythm and steps.

This structure corresponds to one of European court-dances suites, performed in the halls of the European nobility, which slowly evolved into the social dances of the more recent colonial matrix. This structure also reflects a similar division existing among performative forms of African origin, comprising both ritual dances performed in groups during ceremonies and solo dances, occurring in direct relation with the percussions and corresponding to the moments during which the members could enter a trance. These ceremonies also tend to conclude with a group dance, this time with a vernacular character and in a moment of conviviality.

The first section of Tumba Francesa is called the *Masón*,<sup>10</sup> or *Masun*, and its name signals the place where the dance was created. Its name, in fact, derives from the French word *maison* (house), as this dance was performed in the masters' homes. The enslaved people of the large coffee and tobacco farms worked in rooms where the coffee was peeled, and in *secaderos*, where the coffee was dried. Peeling the coffee was very hard work, lasted for hours on end and was carried out inside a large room where the enslaved people had developed the habit, on rare moments of celebration, of imitating the dances seen in the halls of their masters' residences, where the domestic enslaved people spent all their time. Upon discovering the enslaved people's performances, the masters were amazed to see how they had managed to reproduce the dynamics of European dances executing them with their own percussive instruments. Therefore, the dance slowly developed into an artistic form, performed also for the pleasure of the owners, who appreciated the performative skills. The dance thus moved from the closed rooms to the open *secadero*, the place shown in a documentary commissioned by UNESCO and recorded in the restored part of *Cafetal La Isabelica*,<sup>11</sup> located in the Sierra Maestra mountains, where the enslaved people began to perform this dance publicly. *Masón* hosts dance patterns borrowed by Quadrille and Lancers, group dances most often structured into a square, within which several formations assemble and dissolve, continuously changing partners – such as in figures like the *Promenades*, the *Cadenas Inglesas* and *Paseos* that characterized the most amusing moments of the choreographies.<sup>12</sup> *Quadrillas*, *Lancers*, *Mazurcas* and, of course, *Contradanzas* – dances considered among the most

entertaining throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – were danced frequently in the colonial context, with their own characteristic, and house enslaved people were present at these events.

What matters most to us in this context is that the *Masón*, together with a reproduction of European dances, also includes ritual elements hidden by the enslaved people within the structure learned by their masters, in a bid to keep their cultural traditions alive. The opening march, in which the *directora* walks through the room shaking maracas decorated with colored ribbons, constitutes one of these elements. The maracas have a symbolic value, holding a ritual meaning that remains secret even today. While I did not receive any answers when initially inquiring about this, quite another truth was exposed when I mentioned that in other cultures similar elements were a sign of protection, representing the families' and the clans' ancestors: the initial walk through the room constitutes a ritual cleansing gesture that seeks the protection of spirits. Nevertheless, these elements are kept secret or not easily disclosed in order to ensure the protection of the participants and the preservation of the dance itself. We shall come back to this topic later by addressing the theme of music in the same context.

The second part of the dance is the *Yubá*<sup>13</sup> and this bears a more creolized character: its structure is already moving away from the canonical forms and dynamics of court dances revealing freer and more modern patterns, with a more subjective and unrestricted type of tempo. While the initial part is also performed in a group, the group dancing the *Yubá* gradually becomes smaller – two or three couples at most – who are chosen to dance and to stage a kind of “competition.” We can recognize therein certain elements bearing an already distinctly ritual character. At the beginning of the dance, the chosen female dancers are introduced to the drums with a symbolic gesture: as the women turn around and swoop under the arm of the group's captain, they perform the turn always from right to left, as in ceremonial events. The headquarters of Tumba Francesa dance companies also always include a table bearing religious symbols used as an altar, at the front of which the drums are sometimes placed.

Although it incorporates some of the figures already observed in the *Masón*'s group choreographies, *Yubá*'s dance patterns are simplified, shorter, and are a predominant part of the couples' dance performance. The entire dance is performed with a specific step executed by each dancer in a very personal way. The individual styles are an important element, a specific interpretative mark that gives expression to the dance and to the beauty of each couple's presentation. According to the explanation given by the company's lead dancer, Mr. Gilberto, son of Mrs. Sara Kiala Venet – both members of the family who founded the association *La Caridad de Oriente*<sup>14</sup> – the step is reminiscent of the movement associated to the action of peeling coffee, performed with the feet for hours on end in the halls of the *Cafetal*, later transferred to the dance and adapted to the vertical posture of the torso and to the couple dynamic. It is also possible that such movement of the feet, already recorded in traditional forms of ritual dances and responding to similar drumbeats, stemmed from muscle memory associated to a re-functionalization of movement and gestures. This sliding movement, which can be found repeatedly in the universe of the African diaspora, is here executed in its lightest, shortest, and most intimate form. It does not intend to assert the individuality of the dancer but aims to create a group-specific couple dance aesthetic that characterizes the African descent identity of its members. The name of this section seems to stem from the *Juba* dance

present in Haiti (and also in other regions, such as in Charleston, South Carolina) imported by enslaved Kongos and originally deriving from the *Djouba* dance of the Djoumbai Nation. African *Djouba* is a flirtation dance distinguished by the same elegant and very subtle swaying of the hips. This African dance also involves executing the same steps in more performative jumping and sliding movements, whereas in Tumba Francesa they appear only in the *Frente* section as a solo dance, while in the couple dance section these steps are executed just caressing the floor. A more concrete description of the movements will allow the reader to get a better idea of what happens and thereby appreciate the argument in more depth.

As anticipated, the third part of the dance is the *Frente*,<sup>15</sup> where the main male dancers – usually two or three at the most – face the drums one by one in a challenge. Here, the *premier* drum soloist improvises in a bid to both accompany and stimulate the dancers' improvisations, challenging them using its powerful and surprising rhythmic patterns. The drums in this occasion are placed horizontally on the floor, the *premier* percussionist sits on it and faces every dancer one by one, directly. The selected male dancers face the drum trying to guess the strongest accents of its improvisations and mark them with sharp movements of the hands, arms, or legs in its direction. The beauty of the dance is produced by the creativity and agility of the dancer's improvisation, entering in complete synchronicity and empathy with the music up to the point of understanding when the strongest beats will come and mark these moments with more intense gestures. This is the most spectacular section of the dance, a dynamic dialogue that leads to authentically acrobatic moments and to a multiple challenge between the main drum and the soloist, and among the dancers themselves.

This element is typical of many dances of various African origins such as Yoruba, Gbe-Fon, and Bantu. In this case, we note that this solo performance is also present in voodoo dances, and that the specific rhythm played for this part of the dance – the *Frente* – is very similar to the ceremonial rhythm played during voodoo rituals, and especially similar to the Yanvalou beat, which is known as Savalú in the Brazilian religions of Minas Gerais, is very similar to the Chachalokafu rhythm in Cuba, and is also quite close to the modern Uruguayan rhythm called Candombe,<sup>16</sup> while the style of the playing and some of the movements can be found in other Caribbean dances like Puerto Rican Bomba or Guadeloupean Gwoka. We cannot forget that in many African cultures, drums that were used for religious purposes were sacred, embodying a specific spirit that is supposed to be attended and celebrated. Thus, the inclusion of the *Frente* in collective public dances represents a significant step toward the blending of the forms, but also reveals the intrinsic sacred value of these gatherings and their importance as forms of resistance. The *Tajona* is the dance most directed linked to European codes, and derives directly from Medieval dances performed outdoors, on a round base. Compared to the others, it is far closer to Spanish culture, and it is mostly sung in Spanish. In an important interview,<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Gaudiosa Venet Danger, former dancer, singer, and composer of Tumba Francesa *La Caridad de Oriente* revealed that originally another dance form called *gallo tapao*, was part of the performance, but this is no longer practiced.<sup>18</sup>

Many ritual elements have come together within manifestations of music and dance, originally hidden in the form of the simplest entertainment, but in reality, acting for the preservation of sacred beliefs and symbolic gestures. These gestures have been prohibited, both in colonial and post-colonial times, considering the rigid antireligious policy

promulgated by the revolutionary Cuban government. The reconfiguration of said gestures in a new interracial communicative and vernacular structure, keeping their sacred meanings secret to most of the public, allowed the protection of a physical, cultural, and symbolic memory that traveled through the centuries passing from one body to the next and surviving till today.

Always performed as a form of entertainment, Tumba Francesa is nowadays socially recognized as a mere “folkloric” phenomenon<sup>19</sup> and is essentially performed to satisfy tourists’ curiosity, as the last generation of this community, now fully integrated into a unified Cuban context, does not feel the need to defend cultural differentiation.

## Rhythm and musical memory

The musical component of this phenomenon has a very old and interesting origin. Predictably, the musical instruments used to perform Tumba Francesa are percussion instruments; we find a very complete description of these in the book by Fernando Ortiz *Los instrumentos de la Música afrocubana*<sup>20</sup> as well as in Olavo Alén’s *La música de las sociedades de tumba francesa*.<sup>21</sup>

The polyrhythmic structure required to adapt traditional rhythms was recreated with various types of percussion instruments.<sup>22</sup> Tumba Francesa is played with the *tambora*, bimembranophone drum, the *maracas*, introduced above, the *premier*, or *mamier* – the solo drum for improvisation – the *bula*, or *arcend* – smaller and producing a more high-pitched sound and used in couple – the *katá*<sup>23</sup> (also written *catá*). The *katá* plays the main pattern which in other rhythms is marked by the clave or eventually by the *campana*,<sup>24</sup> an instrument also used in the traditional ritual beats of many African American religious traditions. The specific instruments used, those that the enslaved people learned to play among themselves, passing on their knowledge through generations, were officially banned for enslaved people and often confiscated by the settlers or the authorities, but they could always be reconstructed or reproduced with different materials. Furthermore, inside French plantations, official Spanish colonial policies were not entirely respected. The ability to create rhythmic orchestrations with percussions enabled the enslaved people to transcribe the rhythmic and melodic relationship of their masters’ dances, originally played with string and wind instruments, and to create their own versions of the dances performed in the French halls. The *Masón* contains certain rhythmic similarities with one of the beats used in voodoo rituals, albeit slower, adjusting and transforming the beat from ternary to binary to enable the necessary gait of the dance to be reproduced;<sup>25</sup> therefore, the rhythm provides the dancers recognizable spiritual engagement. The *Yubá* reveals even a closer connection to the sacred rhythm performed in Voodoo ceremonies, producing a pattern compatible to a very common one played in Yoruba ceremonies, but with a quicker execution and on a 6/8 clave pattern.<sup>26</sup>

In relation to the *Frente* section Mr. Gilberto, actual *premier* player and dancer of Santiago’s Tumba, confirmed that the rhythm is a 6/8 clave and that it is very similar to the Columbia rhythmic pattern – a very performative and not religious dance style included in the Rumba forms – but played with different accents. The specific origin of these patterns is not known, but we do know that the “success” of specific rhythmic patterns in the diaspora is strictly related to the specific African origin of the majority local inhabitants, and 6/8 patterns are more easily associated to Congo cultures. The influence of this important

African branch of Afro-Cuban culture is less present in other areas, where the Yoruba or Dahomeyan communities had more importance, while it is equally present in the eastern part of Cuba and in the Haitian territory.

If dance is a living memory of continuous cultural negotiation between the various sociocultural aspects of the colonial and post-colonial contexts, music also has an enormous relevance not only a cultural repository, but also often as the only possible way to communicate within the culturally diverse African diaspora. Individual and collective identities are reaffirmed through learning and through the transmission of significant rhythms from specific cultural contexts, as well as based on cultural assimilation and the creation of new cultural nuclei. In oral contexts, traditional rhythms are often used in ceremonial situations, but they also go hand in hand with work and social gatherings. Accepting an exchange of rhythmic languages implies sharing beliefs and establishing common perspectives as regards the development of sensitivities, of experiences, and of a common identity based on a system of signifier and signified, both negotiated and shared.<sup>27</sup>

When talking about similarities between these rhythmic forms and others, in the Caribbean or in the Americas, I should point out the danger of reductive cultural rapprochement, which I am aware of and which I do not intend to encourage. However, we should note said similarity in order to introduce the idea of the existence of a family of rhythms that while presenting different emphases – due to their metric adjustment or to the simplification of their rhythmic schemes over time – are based on similar structures and probably derive from common origins.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, when discussing similar rhythms, I do not mean to say that these different cultural products are identical to each other, but that they may constitute points of arrival of similar cultural development paths, whose specific local characteristics encompass the wealth and the unique character of the different cultural influences they integrate. This process is only partially witnessed in the performance itself, also influenced by the filter of the body's education, by its physical or moral limitations, whether spontaneous or imposed. This repository's shaped is based on the aesthetic experience learned, or of the sensory experience acquired in life. In this sense, I welcome the perspective of Stefan Palmié,<sup>29</sup> who recognizes a double possible way of addressing the study of the African presence in the Caribbean: that is, by either focusing on the African legacy or by focusing on Caribbean products as a cultural specificity that resulted from the process of creolization. This perspective allows us to examine the different linguistic and performative forms as a whole system, characterized by continuities and disjunctions in Atlantic cultural history, and strictly related to economic and socio-political circumstances.<sup>30</sup>

### **Linguistic memory: From Kreyòl to Creole**

Still spoken on the island to this day, though in constant change and in danger of extinction, *Kreyòl* – Haitian Creole – survived through Tumba Francesa song lyrics. It was, however, purposely distanced from the mystical and religious contents that used to accompany the performance of ceremonial rhythms, as well as religious symbol that could be recognizable within the theatrical practices. Mystical words have been gradually censored, and lyrics took on a more social and political character, when associated to contemporary reality. The main reason for this cleansing was primarily the colonial regime and the prohibition of ancient cults, although this trend was further reinforced during



the Cuban revolution by the strong repressive action that rejected all religious and non-secular cultural forms. What we observe in this context is also the gradual rising of the local *Creole* – sometimes simply called *Patuá*: a sociolect containing elements of Haitian Creole and of the local variant of Spanish, characterized by a phonematic transcription and receiving influences from African languages.<sup>31</sup> This determines some significant differences in the *patois* languages used in the different sites where Tumba Francesa is still practiced: these communities are in fact quite far apart and their geographical conditions have determined a more conservative version of *Kreyòl* in the rural areas, and a more developed *Creole* in the urban centers – for example, in Camaguey, the Cuban city with the highest number of Haitian descendent where the *Coro Criollo de Cuba* was founded in 1994.<sup>32</sup> A local version of *Kreyòl*, which is actually closer to the Haitian Creole, exists in small rural areas in the Eastern side of Cuba, where, unfortunately, the dance has not survived. The documentary *Reshipment*, by Afro-Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando (2014),<sup>33</sup> depicts this phenomenon and explains why Haitian Creole mainly survived in songs for dancing and ritual ceremonies. In fact, it shows that a great number of Haitian were expelled during the government of Pío Socarrás – starting in 1933 and experiencing its most violent episodes in 1937 – under the motto “Cuba para los Cubanos.”<sup>34</sup> This policy opened a long period of marginalization for the remaining Haitians, and a tragic destiny of illegality for those who refused to leave the land where they had obtained their freedom. Haitian Creole survived longer under specific circumstances where Haitian communities remained often very isolated. For the Cubans of Haitian origins living in Eastern cities, and already freed from slavery for two generations, the Haitian Creole was marked by specific sentences, expressions, and vocabulary related to the community and the working context, and its use was highly discouraged. However, only some enslaved people who shared this background had come from Haiti. During an interview for the documentary *Tumba Francesa* (1979),<sup>35</sup> the former director of Santiago’s Tumba Francesa Consuelo Venet explained the complexity of her multi-ethnic origin and the importance of her affiliation to French culture in these terms:

Interviewer: Consuelo, where are your parents from?  
 Consuelo Venet: From here, from Caney.  
 Interviewer: But, are they Haitians?  
 Consuelo Venet: No, French!  
 Interviewer: How French?  
 Consuelo Venet: French, not Haitians, Congo! They were from Congo!  
 Interviewer: Which language do they speak?  
 Consuelo Venet: French and also Spanish, cause my grandparents were slaves.

This little extract from of Consuelo Venet’s interview clearly shows how people of African origins arriving in Cuba from Haiti, used to define themselves as French when compared to Cuban or Spanish inhabitants, while, conversely, used to declare very proudly to be from Africa, and especially from the ancient kingdom of Congo, when compared to French, or French-Haitians (Franco-Haitianos). The overlapping of these social identities is part of the process of transculturation and it becomes evident in this apparently contradictory affirmation.

The enslaved people who arrived directly from Africa learned Haitian Creole in order to communicate with the owner of the plantations and with the other workers, but then the exposition of this language to a wider and more mixed community and the influence of

Spanish produced a new language. This becomes evident observing the lyrics of the song copied in the following table: a *Minuet*, originally composed in Haitian *Kreyòl* and then, gradually, through repetition, transformed into a Cuban *Creole* composition; which reveals a progressive phonetic adaptation to Spanish.

Kreyòl	Creole	English
Minwi sò lè o	Minui soleo	Midnight, the time of spell,
Se lè mwen sa	sele mue sa	is my time.
Minwi sò lè o	Minui soleo	Midnight, the time of spell,
Se lè mwen sa	sele mue sa	is my time.
Minwi sò lè o achade	Minui soleo achade	Midnight, achade, is the time for spell,
Se lè kòm band bon ye	sele cumbamboye	What a time my brothers.
Si yo mande pou mwen	Si yo mande pu mue,	If they ask me,
Mwen ale	mue la e	I would go!
Si yo mande pou mwen	Si yo mande pu mue,	If they ask. me,
Mwen ale	mue la e	I would go!
Si yo mande pou mwen	Si yo mande pu mue,	If they ask me,
Mwen ale	mue la e	I would go!
Mwen kache rèd	Mue cachire	I would hide my resistance
La fanmi asanble agoe	La fami samble ago e	¡The family is reunited there, agoé!
La fanmi asanble agoe	La fami samble ago e	¡The family is reunited there, agoé!
E liy a wi ni ban de nou	Ella güini bande nos	¡The family is reunited there, agoé!
Ae! Ae! Louvri baryè pou mwen	Ae ae, lubri barrie pu meu	Ae ae, open the door for me!
Ae! Ae! Louvri baryè pou mwen	Ae ae, lubri barrie pu meu	Ae ae, open the door for me!
Louvri baryè pou mwen	lubri barrie pu mue	Open the door for me!

The transition between the Haitian *Kreyòl* and Cuban *Creole* can be observed through some expressions and vocabulary, for example: *piti muchue* (small handkerchief), and *gro muchuela* (big handkerchief), where the first term is still entirely of French origin while the second has already taken a suffix which is more common in Spanish-deriving idiolects. The lyrics, on the contrary, are absolutely representative of the conditions of the slave community in Cuba.<sup>36</sup>

In the midst of Cuba's independence struggles, Tumba Francesa associations were venues for the people who were actively participating in the wars for independence (1868–1878 and 1892–1898) as *Mambises* (*guerrilla fighters*), like the brothers Antonio and José Maceo.<sup>37</sup> Today's lyrics testify to this participation, replacing the old ritual memories with new memories of socio-political nature, sung out loud to audiences who could understand the coded messages:

Oye mamoielle se voié compagné mwe?

Oye mamoielle se voié compagné mwe?

Mwe voié a Camaguey buscar la reses que están allá.

(Hello Miss, do you want to accompany me?

Hello Miss, do you want to accompany me?

I am going to Camaguey to take the cows that are there.<sup>38</sup>

This "Hello Miss" in the verses suddenly becomes "*Comandó!*" and the metaphor's meaning is: "Companions, let's go! Let's go to Camaguey, let's go finding the companions who are there."<sup>39</sup> These traditional songs and rhythms thereby operate as a repository for

an entire history and specific poetics, embodying the stratification of community memories as well as its relationship with the socio-political context.

Paradoxically, some decades later, the introduction of revolutionary policies did not harm Tumba Francesa and even favored its dissemination instead to the point that Santiago de Cuba's Tumba Francesa and many other art-based associations of African descent were all founded between 1959 and 1961. The socialist revolutionary government was demonstrably impressed by the lyrics' revolutionary comradeship, thereby approving the preservation of Tumba Francesa as a cultural heritage, whose survival also indirectly helped preserve the Haitian language in Cuba.<sup>40</sup> It was not until these practices were recognized as being removed from any kind of religious messages, both symbolically and under the circumstances in which the transmission process occurred, that the revolutionary government supported them through cultural support measures. For this support, however, these societies had to be perceived as representative of Cuban culture, and not of their Haitian origin. For this reason, and due to the long tradition of concealing the deeper roots hidden within this musical and theatrical tradition, it was only after several interviews characterized by evasive responses that my sources confirmed that the song lyrics had been substantially altered with the passage of time—although there are still words belonging to the Haitian Creole vocabulary. In the case of Santiago's Tumba Francesa, it was Mrs. Consuelo, the current director's grandmother who, in the mid-nineteenth century, decided to transform the lyrics to dissociate them from any mystical character, thereby protecting the community and its practices.

The song lyrics oblige us to step back to the musical aspect to clarify the specific relationship between the words and the music in African oral tradition performative codes. As formerly in Africa – and notably today still within the tradition of many communities of Bantu origin – rhythm is the true means of communication. Responding to the invitation of the rhythms, the community gathers and expresses itself. The song floating above the rhythm can vary and is by tradition spontaneous and improvised; it allows the group to process its experiences by commenting on daily happenings and informing the community about recent events. Congregating around this tradition of music and songs allows the community to share information and partake in social life. Cuban Rumba is still based on this concept.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, to this day, a carnival plot is devised each year, and the musical arts of the African diaspora continue to report on events in an entirely oral and metaphorical fashion. This oral memory passed on through song, music, and dance is incorporated as an experience and permeates the community's individual and collective identity.

In this context, we must bear in mind that the techniques used to record history via oral (discursive or performative) manifestations have been transformed with the advancement of technologies, which imposed new ways of treating and disseminating these narratives as well as presenting new ethical and aesthetic challenges. Recording music lyrics as a fixed and indivisible unit is a by-product of western modern cultures. In the African tradition – as well as in other cultures – words float above the music, travel through and change, while the rhythm remains. Rhythms withstand the test of time, they renew and adapt themselves by changing the instruments, or even by converting melodic instruments into rhythmic ones. Rhythms allow people to incorporate the voice of the colonized into the aesthetics of the colonizer, thus achieving a form of liberation for bodies that had constantly disregarded and brutalized. African music thus reconfigured classic European genres and created modern rhythms. In doing so, and using these tools, the

stories of African descendants have survived, carrying within themselves their own history and the memories of a silenced community.

It is impossible to speak of African and African-descendant narratives without mentioning the interconnection of these elements, of this mode of communication and of these means of recording memories. We should also consider how the art currently produced based on the memory of these events embodies an archive that is not “intangible,” but enshrined and embodied, and very much alive. It is essential that the physical bodies carrying such narratives do not continue to be completely ignored.

## Social history and material culture

From the documentary recorded at the Cafetal La Isabelica<sup>42</sup> in Santiago de Cuba at the UNESCO's request, and also comparing this material with recordings provided by the group of *La Pompadour*<sup>43</sup> of Guantanamo and by the rural group of Bejuco, it becomes evident that this theatrical and musical phenomenon identifies a specific historic and social process which reflects the evolution of similar close-knit communities. In his seminal work *La isla que se repite*,<sup>44</sup> Antonio Benítez Rojo establishes a direct connection between the level of Africanization of the territories and their level of performativity, relating this element with the specific kind of plantation industry installed in the different areas – different levels of development of the local sugar, coffee, or tobacco industries lead to different kind of social relationships and grades of proximity developed between the enslaved populations and their masters.<sup>45</sup> Different social dynamics would promote different levels of self-representations and diverse layers of transculturation. The creolized character of these dance forms, as explicitly revealed in the already mentioned interviews,<sup>46</sup> is surely the result of a closer relationship established between the enslaved people and the French masters, which might even derive from the common condition of exile that the two social groups were sharing on the Cuban territory.

Cuba has been the receptacle of many African ethnic groups since the sixteenth century, and Santiago was the first capital of this journey. Santiago's central location proved to be decisive at the time of the Haitian revolution when, as a result of the wave of immigration from this island to the Eastern part of Cuba, trade intensified between Cuba, France, and other Caribbean locations.<sup>47</sup> The French settlers' decision to set up their coffee cultivation in the mountainous and isolated regions of the East contributed to the creation of microsocieties, characterized by more complex and culturally rich relationships, within which multiple elements stimulated the development of creole artistic codes and the organization of events involving collective participation.<sup>48</sup> Since its inception the strength of the coffee industry in this region has marked a multi-ethnic and more modern cultural identity than those of the microsocieties linked to sugar and tobacco production, within which internal divisions were much more marked and resistant to change.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, Eastern Cuba has always been culturally more diverse than the rest of the island.

Santiago was dubbed the “Capital of the Caribbean” and considered the point of reference in this microcosm.<sup>50</sup> The ethnically differentiated substrate with a specific natural and social environment explains the cultural complexity of this area, which indirectly supports a concept of culture as something not clearly defined or homogeneous, where differentiation and dispute are central elements. The concept of “Diversity Management”

used by Isabelle Barth invites us to rethink the very concept of society and ethnic identity by linking cultural phenomena to the circumstances of their development.<sup>51</sup> In this respect, Tumba Francesa reveals its full importance as a “cultural” phenomenon representing a transcultural assimilation whose internal differentiations are often downplayed or ignored and, also, from a geopolitical point of view, provides a new perspective on cultural affiliation. Cuba’s cultural identity as represented in Santiago expresses a greater affinity with other Caribbean communities that have directly intersected with its history. This is fundamental for shaping the identity of the community, for the narrative element intricately linked to its education, as well as for the physical and spiritual bond with its ancestors.

This system of relationships, embedded inside another socioeconomic reality, is clearly visible through the clothing used in Tumba Francesa’s performances, which reveals a direct connection between the city and late eighteenth century’s French fashion, and which substantially differs from the Spanish influence on the rest of the island. Santiago’s enslaved people’s festive clothes were very elegant and of high quality: the owners would offer the enslaved people old garments whenever they ordered new models from the French capital, and they seemed keen on transforming their slaves into a creole imitation of French society. Thus, fully consistent with the carnival spirit the city is renowned for, a manifestation of disguise came to life, in which the enslaved people imitated and caricatured their owners. What’s more, the caricatures became so interesting that they turned into an art form appreciated by the caricatured owners themselves, and thereby into a place of cultural preservation and resistance.

Tumba Francesa as a cultural manifestation of this stratified identity is an example of what Homi Bhabha defines as a third space: as a space in which to nurture the shaping of tradition as well as of collective and individual identity, and in which to develop power acquisition strategies.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, this cultural manifestation and its ongoing process of “resistance to reconstruction”<sup>53</sup> is a significant sphere of the liminal post-colonial condition: “a sphere where a change in meaning occurs as a result of the articulation of differences.”<sup>54</sup> Hosting ritual elements this performing act could fall under Victor Turner’s definition of “state of transition,” where the condition of marginality is processed and which is characterized by a basal non-dualism: where signifier and signified dissolve into indiscriminable existence.<sup>55</sup> These circumstances witness the inception of actions that lie at the root of social aggregation and the shaping of identity,<sup>56</sup> in Fetson Kalua’s words: “the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (25).

This artistic phenomenon illustrates the complexity of the cross-cultural dynamics described by Fernando Ortiz,<sup>57</sup> portraying the importance of the infinite local variations created by the intersection of cultures, and it also helps us understand some of the evolutionary stages of contemporary artistic styles not only in dance, but also in music and in literature. For this same reason, it also found a relevant position in literary works, like in Alejo Carpentier’s *El reino deste mundo*<sup>58</sup> and in Emilio Bacardí Moreau’s short story *Vía crucis*,<sup>59</sup> that represents a paradigm of the syncretism of the Caribbean society.

The value of this cultural manifestation is paradigmatic, as Ananya Kabir affirms: “This relationship between the quadrille suite and its constituent figures performs an embodied phenomenology of creolized dance.”<sup>60</sup> The development of Tumba Francesa mirrors the

social dynamics existing within the context of the colonial coffee farms and that of the progressive social evolution in Eastern Cuba. In terms of cultural heritage management, it offers a point of reflection on the strategies adopted nowadays for the preservation of the same typology of heritage, constituting a paradigmatic example for the elaboration of socio-cultural policies based on cultural recognition. In fact, Tumba Francesa also becomes an archive of African religious symbols that has survived the many censorship of history, making this process of concealment and symbolic regeneration the basis for a new collective identity.

Among the many obstacles encountered by these communities over time, we still need to highlight the enduring silence that does not stem from forgetting or from a lack of legacy, but from self-censorship: a self-defense system triggered by fear and still deeply entrenched in Cuban society, which testifies that the original collective trauma has not yet been processed. As Marie-Claire Lavabre explains, memory has a dual nature – it is as much a conceptual object as it is an actual object – and it materializes in social and physical practices.<sup>61</sup> This duality is acquiring heightened importance in the study of memory and both sides must receive equal recognition. The lack of recognition of the tangible aspect of individual and collective memory reduces its ontological value and feeds mutual incomprehension, self-reduction, and self-marginalization in the social context. This self-inflicted restriction of one's own freedom is an acquired existential condition that cannot be deactivated from within and may only be abolished by means of social and political action involving all the communities participating in this historical process; in an active, responsible, and non-self-referential way.

Tumba Francesa is currently one of the many performing phenomena whose real value goes beyond the superficial attention that has received for its role as a “witness;” rather, its value is linked to its role of semiotic signifier: as the mirror of a complex negotiation process with respect to survival systems, performance spaces, self-representation, and empowerment. In this context, its enhancement is still in process.

## Notes

1. Negro, *Deuses em cena*, 2019.
2. On this same topic, see also Negro, “Macubá,” 225–247.
3. Associations of slaves or freed slaves of common ethnic origin were created in Cuba and in other colonial contexts from the sixteenth century until the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. These associations had a religious and social function and were directed by a king and a queen elected among the members, and these used to lead the group in the annual local parade in the carnival.
4. “Les Chants De Tumba Francesa,” Cruz and Venet Danger, *No quiero morir, Daniel Mirabeau and Daniel Chatelain*, Accessed 25 February 2024. <http://www.ritmacuba.com/Chants-de-tumba-francesa.html>.
5. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, chapter I; IX.
6. Strauss, *Introduction to Marcel Mauss*, 16–18.
7. Badiou, “Dance as a Metaphor for Thought,” 70.
8. See Figarola, *El vodú en Cuba*.
9. Also called *Danza de las Cintas*, very common in all of Central and South America.
10. The recordings of the rehearsals of the group *La Caridad de Oriente* in the section Tumba Francesa-Masón. Accessed 25 February 2024. [www.francescanegro.com](http://www.francescanegro.com).
11. Accessed 25 February 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23gDleCxfrC>

12. Triguero Tamayo, *Placeres del cuerpo*, 39–51.
13. The recordings of the rehearsals of the group *La Caridad de Oriente* in the section *Tumba Francesa-Yubá*. Accessed 25 February 2024. [www.francescanegro.com](http://www.francescanegro.com).
14. The founder of *Tumba Francesa La Caridad de Oriente* is considered Consuelo Venet. The group is actually far older and derives from the split of a previous one: *Sociedad de Tumba Francesa La Fayette*.
15. The recording of the rehearsals of the group *La Caridad de Oriente* in the section *Tumba Francesa-Frente*. Accessed 25 February 2024. [www.francescanegro.com](http://www.francescanegro.com).
16. See Collins, *African Musical Symbolism*, 29.
17. Daniel Chatelain and Daniel Mirabeau, *Les Chants De Tumba Francesa*. Extract of: Cruz and Venet Danger, *No quiero morir y pensar que no exista la tumba*. Accessed 25 February 2024. <http://www.ritmacuba.com/Chants-de-tumba-francesa.html>.
18. *Gallo tapao* is an expression used to identify a person with capacities that are not available to or revealed in public; this terminology travels all across Latin America. Here many dances take inspiration from the movements of the rooster and the chicken, in Cuba *yuka* dance refers to this symbology while in Panama a dance called *El gallo y la gallina* still exists. This point is quite interesting because this dance presents steps which are very similar to the ones that we see in the above-mentioned *Juba* dance performed in Charleston, South Carolina, but executed by couples and in group choreography. From this, we can conclude that all these dances are somehow linked and share a common symbology.
19. I am referring here to the meaning of folklore as used by Alan Dundes, whose texts are now collected in the volume Bronner, *Meaning of Folklore*, and who introduced this topic to academia. Following the most recent reformulations on “folklore,” I believe it is time to reconsider this terminology. On this topic, see Gencarella, “Constituting Folklore,” 172–196; Abrahams, “After New Perspectives,” 379–400.
20. Ortiz, *Los instrumentos de la Musica Afrocubana*, 131.
21. See Olavo, *La música de las sociedades de tumba francesa*, 68–100.
22. Méndez, “Poéticas de la transculturación,” 148–162. For a specific explanation of the difference of the patterns, see: Olavo Alén, “Rhythm as Duration of Sounds in Tumba Francesa,” 55–71.
23. *Tumba Francesa La Caridad de Oriente*. Accessed 25 February 2024. <https://cubanbridge.wordpress.com/2017/01/24/aniversario-155-sociedad-de-tumba-francesa-en-santiago-de-cuba/#jp-carousel-30883>
24. Ortiz, *La Africana*, chapters II, III, IV.
25. Galis Riveri, *La percusión en los ritmos afrocubanos*, chapters I, III, IV.
26. Peñalosa, *The Clave Matrix*, 92.
27. See Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, 108–127; see also Cañizares-Esguerra, “Racial, Religious, and Civic Creole Identity,” 420–437, and Adjaye and Andrews, *Language, Rhythm, and Sound*.
28. Observing this dance from a technical point of view, we can also note its similarity with the modern Rumba Columbia, danced alone and by men only. These comparisons allow us to perceive the process of vernacularisation of certain dances coming from the ritual contexts. See Negro, *Deuses em cena*, 47–117.
29. Palmié, “Ecué’s Atlantic,” 275–315.
30. Guanche, *Processos etnoculturales*, 269–272; 275–279.
31. García Riverón, “Caracterización geolingüística del español de Cuba,” 69–92.
32. *Coro criollo*. Accessed 25 February 2024. <https://www.elminnesotadehoy.com/mas-raices-y-mas-suenos-con-los-coros-creoles-cubanos/>.
33. An extract of Gloria Rolando’s documentary. Accessed 25 February 2024. <https://aalbc.com/reviews/gloria-rolando.html>.
34. On the impact of this event, see Bacardi Moreau, *Cronicas De Santiago De Cuba*; Callejas, *Historia de Santiago de Cuba*.
35. *Tumba Francesa (1979)*. Directed by Santiago Villafuerte. Accessed 25 February 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nzKWtd62WM>.

36. For more lyrics in Haitian Creole, see Mirabeau, "Cantos de las comunidades haitianas en Cuba," in *Ritmacuba* 2019. Accessed 25 February 2024. [https://www.ritmacuba.com/Cantos%20de%20las%20comunidades%20haitianas\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ritmacuba.com/Cantos%20de%20las%20comunidades%20haitianas_2019.pdf).
37. Antonio Maceo is a hero of Cuban independence and with his brother was member of Bejuco's Tumba Francesa. See Pereira da Silva, "Bailando tumba francesa," 33–42.
38. The lyrics of these songs were transcribed during my last visit to Santiago in 2019.
39. This explanation has been provided by Sara Kiala Venet during an interview that took place in Santiago de Cuba on 16 September 2019.
40. Haiti had a majority of slaves coming from Dahomey and Congo. Dahomeyan groups gave birth to the Arara religion in Cuba, known in Haiti as Rada, the white spirits. See Viddal, *Vodú Chic*. Accessed 25 February 2024. <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/12274510>.
41. Rumba consists of a family of much more recent rhythms, wholly vernacular in all aspects, though inspired by the observation of events, people's reactions, and social life dynamics. See Santos Gracia, *Danzas populares tradicionales cubanas*, and Daniel, *Rumba: Dance and Social Change*.
42. La Tumba Francesa UNESCO Documentary. Accessed 25 February 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kL5r21IGNg>.
43. Tumba Francesa Guantanamo *Pompadour*. Accessed 25 February 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YO8ZP8AM5SQ>.
44. Benítez-Rojo, *La Isla Que Se Repite*, "Introduction" and chapter 6.
45. See Singleton, "Slavery and Spatial Dialectics," 98–114.
46. Cruz-Venet Danger, "No quiero morir y pensar que no exista la tumba."
47. Negro, *Deuses em cena*, 109–116.
48. Triguero Tamayo, *Placeres del cuerpo*, 39–51.
49. I owe the explanations on the relationship between the commercial trades of the eastern areas of Cuba and the development of local artistic forms to Martínez Savón. His research has been showcased in the exhibition "De la idea a la forma" that took place at Casa Victor Hugo in Havana between December 2018 and January 2019.
50. See Figarola, *El Caribe entre el ser y el definir*.
51. Barth and Mahieu, "Diversity Management and Organizational Change," 105–116.
52. See Kalua, "Homi Bhabha's Third Space," 23–32; Rutherford, *Identity*, 207–221; and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.
53. Ashcroft et al., eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2.
54. "The slippage of signification that is celebrated in the articulation of difference," Bhabha, *O local da cultura*, 235.
55. Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, 48. This perspective on liminality was initially used by Van Gennep in his tripartite taxonomy of "separation; margin (or limen); and reaggregation," which he saw as characteristic of all rites of passage. Victor Turner adopted liminality as the middle notion of transition, meaning a consciousness of borderlands, seeing it as central in explaining the importance of various spaces that can be identified in human cultural experience.
56. Kalua, "Homi Bhabha's Third Space," 25.
57. Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, 3.
58. Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo*, 10.
59. Bacardi Moreau, *Vía Crucis*, 44.
60. Kabir "Creolization as Balancing Act," 146. See also Kabir's guest edited special issue in *Atlantic Studies*: "African-heritage partner dances." <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rjas20/17/1?nav=tocList>.
61. Lavabre, "Paradigmes de la mémoire," 139–147.

## Acknowledgements

Some of the fieldwork for this article (the visits to Cuba in July 2018) was partially funded by the Centre for Comparatives Studies of the School of Art and Humanities of the University of Lisbon.



I thank the Tourism Office of the city of Santiago and Professor Maria del Carmen Rodríguez Sanchez, from Universidad de Oriente, Cansuelo Venet and her son Henrique Venet of the Association *Tumba Francesa La Caridad de Oriente*, for their valued contributions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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