

## Afro-Cuban dance training & teaching



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### Aims and Objectives

There is a growing demand for the training of Afro-Cuban folkloric techniques in London yet it remains unknown to the younger generation of youths in multicultural Britain. My main aim was to learn as many techniques of Cuban folklore in order to teach them as an entity for Primary school kids and community groups in the U.K.

Before going to Cuba I had four objectives, which were to look into the history of;

1. The Marriage of Cuban dance and Music - why one is so inherent to the other in African-Cuban dance.
2. To learn more about the different drum rhythms and the development of the use of an African drum in Cuba.
3. The dance form itself - "Afro-Cuban". What defines the 'African' and what defines the 'Cuban' in the dance experience and how the two fused together becomes one technique/form.
4. "Afro-Cuban" is it a literal cross over of dance forms or an aesthetic blend of forms?

I came back to the U.K with new objectives arising whilst on the fellowship to Cuba. "To establish a Summer School of Afro-Cuban dance using traditional ritual paradigms to house a new vocabulary that speaks about contemporary issues that reflects our emotions".

I was not able to focus on my first two objectives as that required training in drumming lessons and an interpreter to translate the development of the use of African drums in Cuba today. My priority was in learning and absorbing the dance experience as much as possible. Learning about the different drum rhythms came from having the dance experience. The difficulty I faced was getting the historical context of the dance translated to English as Spanish is the first language of Cuba. An important lesson learnt was that repetition of the movement was more beneficial to me than learning lots of different techniques in a short space of time.

Afro-Cuban dance can be studied at all levels of education as it is practised widely in Cuba. My aim of the fellowship is to expand the minds of children in Primary schools about African dance and show them that it encompasses more than one art form.

Being of Afro-Caribbean descent, I wanted to focus on a dance form from my cultural heritage and Afro-Cuban dance has a great impact on the world today through its histories and its popular entertainment value that enhances multicultural Britain.

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## Introduction

One of the reasons why I started this fellowship was in the quest to get Afro-Cuban dance on the national curriculum. It is very popular to have dance as an extra curricular activity in Primary schools and as a GCSE in some secondary schools across the U.K. I am also aware of the popularity that street dance culture has on children of all ages and wanted to disseminate Afro-Cuban dance, which reflects multicultural Britain because it's about different cultures merging together.

Despite the popularity and influence of Latin American dances, for example; salsa, rumba, mambo, to name a few, the complex cultures that formed these dances are insufficiently known. Afro-Cuban Yoruba dances come from an old ritual tradition called Orisha dancing, imported to Cuba from Nigeria. It expresses notions of life through characters, which evoke the spirits of different Gods/Goddesses. To name a few; Elegua (male or female) is the God that opens and closes the roads of life; wisdom, health, happiness, grief, etc. Chango (male) is the God of war. Ochasi (male) is the God of the hunting of birds and the wild animals. Yemaya is the mother of all the Orishas, Goddess of the Ocean. Oya (female) is the warrior goddess. She is the Queen of the cemetery.

This becomes very theatrical as the costume, props and singing enhances the colourful dance experience. Each character dances to a different drum rhythm and has identifiable dance steps.

I am concerned that children rarely get to access dance in theatres but are exposed to pop videos on TV and MTV music & dance culture daily. My motivation is to reach out to younger children by performing Afro-Cuban dances and pass it down before it leads to an abandonment of folkloric repertoire.

I aim to set up a summer school in London exploring the techniques and stories of the Orishas. I hope to provide a platform where young people can perform as a youth dance company. I have achieved a grounded knowledge of Afro-Cuban dance to incorporate an academic approach in higher education from Universities, to Primary school education. In taking part in the Company classes of "Danza Libre" for two months, my professional development has improved tremendously.

# Background and History of Afro-Cuban Dance Forms

## Week 1

The Spanish contribution arrived in Cuba first in the form of the Spanish language and Spanish literary forms that have influenced music and dance in Cuba from the time of contact up to the present day. The lyrics of songs that accompanied dancing were in Spanish and often the songs were organised in a manner that began in Spain and has forever influenced the literary production of Cuba in the Caribbean and South American Continents.

The imitations of French Contredanse had evolved from English Country dance, which travelled to the French court and then to Haiti, which prevailed in Cuba. This form was a group of salon dances that relied on lines of couples that exchanged places and other partners in intricate floor patterns. Couples of women and men touched hands and fingers occasionally as they crossed the dance floor in rhythmic time to ensemble wind and string instruments. In Spanish this is called 'Contradanza Francesa' which was pivotal to Cuban creativity.

Europeans from both Spain and Haiti were responsible for major elements of a new Cuban dance culture; straight back posture, touching of male and female partners and stamped foot patterns. If it were not for the economic and political demands of sugar production, African cultures might not have entered the Cuban cultural mix as such important branches on the tree of dances that exist today. With the need for an increased labour force in the production and refining of sugar, Africans from the coasts of West and Central Africa were forced into slavery in staggering numbers and taken to Cuba, among the other Caribbean Islands.

A distinct source of African dance culture came to Cuba from Haiti. The dances were different because they were accompanied by the emerging Creole language and not Spanish. They were performed by African people to drum accompaniment of other court-like forms. This was perceived as "their dances" but in reality the dance was a distinct mixture of colonists' European court imitations (Quadrille, contredanse, minuets) and African imitations of these colonial forms.

This music and dance tradition continues in Cuba as Tumba Francesa from the late 1700's to the present. This is why Cuba now has an ensemble of drummers and singers singing in a mixture of Creole, Spanish and Yoruba African chants that accompany the dance tradition of Afro-Cuban folklore.

For my fellowship I wanted to focus on the other influences of African dance that outnumbered Tumba Francesa by far. I learnt that there are four branches of distinct African dance cultures that emerged in the amalgam of hundreds of other African ethnic groups. I knew I would not be able to cover them all in depth as the teachers I came across didn't always have the knowledge of teaching me all of the desired dances.

Firstly, I studied a) Palo, got a taste of b) Arara, read about c) Abakua and focused mainly on d) Yoruba Oricha dances. The names for the dance and music traditions of African descent are used interchangeably in Cuba. They are identified (along with tumba francesa) as the main stylistic traditions of African - derived dance and music in Cuba. While they have surely changed from their sources over the five centuries of African presence in Cuba, these four are considered African and only secondarily Cuban by Cubans, since they are a result of original African creativity. Cubans and others worldwide commonly refer to them as Afro-Cuban traditions, for the Cuban influence that has shaped them since their arrival from West and Central Africa.



Danza Libre Company;  
(From left to right)  
Lady Maria, Grete,  
Zela & Alfredo -  
Director.

## Background of Danza Libre Company

### Week 2

Danza Libre is a folkloric and contemporary dance company based in Guantanamo, Cuba. The company was founded on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1990 under the direction of the distinguished choreographer, Elfriede Mahler of the United States who first collaborated with Ramiro Guerra - director of Modern Dance within the *Teatro Nacional* in Havana, Cuba. After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, Guerra became an important figure in creating an indigenous Cuban modern dance form called the *tecnica cubana*.

The dancer and choreographer Alfredo Velasquez who was a founder member of Danza Libre Company now direct the company. Danza Libre combines the *tecnica cubana* and the folkloric dance forms both unique to Cuba. This is one of the reasons why learning and observing this company was essential to my fellowship experience. The company uses techniques that are a reflection of the African, Spanish and Caribbean roots of Cuban culture within the theatrical tradition. The folkloric work is nourished by the influences of the French-Haitian traditions (Gaga, vodu, Polka, Tumba francesa), which is also the main source of the dancers' training. Besides this, some of their artistic work has the richest spectrum of countryside music in Cuba such as Kiriba, nengon and changui all of which are native to the Guantanamo region (east side of Cuba). The company also works with the folklore of other parts of the country. This is what gives the dancers an extended vocabulary to work with concerning dance and also their interpretation. For example, Abakua derived from all-male secret societies of West Africa and developed in the Matanzas region of Cuba, which is nearer to Havana (west side) in which I would have to travel to draw comparisons to Danza Libre Company.

The company has more than 60 choreographies on its repertory, they are interpreted by a cast of 20 dancers, 5 musicians and 3 singers; all of them have a high professional and technical level.

## Summary

My first week with the company was challenging as most of the dancers spoke very little English and I had very little time to get to know them. My Spanish improved rapidly as I wasn't afraid to make mistakes when speaking and wanted to absorb as much as possible in a short space of time. I caught the company in the middle of their rehearsal for their sixteen-year anniversary celebration where Alfredo the director had invited many other dance companies to join them on the platform of performances every night of the week. I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity of watching and comparing what other dance companies from around Cuba were like and networking with other companies to meet up with them later on in the fellowship program.

I received daily technique classes with dancers from Danza Libre Company who had no idea I was coming and took some time in adjusting to my presence. I made arrangements with Alfredo to learn the folkloric dances of the companies' repertoire in order to have enough knowledge to facilitate my teaching practices in the U.K. On that basis I was assigned with two teachers of the company who taught me different aspects of folkloric dance. First came vodu, which was a solo dance I learnt in my one to one sessions. This was very hard to get into as I was using the wrong emotions being happy and joyous by nature. Not smiling was hard to overcome. My teacher explained that this was a dance of seriousness, to show the mode of happiness and a hint of a smiling face would defeat the purpose. When I asked about the context of the dance I was told that vodu is a ceremonial dance, originating in Haiti. It is performed at a funeral to give sacrifice to the dead by drinking animals' blood. Ladies wear a skirt for this dance, which is an inherent part of the dance movements. The swishing of the skirt is in the choreography and I tried to maintain a serious expression throughout.

In addition to my folklore classes, it was essential to train with the dancers in contemporary technique to warm up the body and balance the mind and body before taking part in the company's repertory classes. This I enjoyed just as much because it has a strong influence from jazz dance combined with the strength of the Cuban ballet tradition, elements of Graham technique and the sensuous fluidity of Afro-Cuban folklore.

## Palo - Choreography

### Week 3

The dance of Palo is very fast and furious. It derived from the religion "Palo Monte" in Congo, central Africa. It is different to Orisha dances because it is from another religion. The Palo belief system rests on two main pillars: the belief in natural ("earth") powers, and honouring the spirits of the ancestors. Natural objects such as wood, are thought to be infused with powers, often linked to the powers of spirits. These objects are known as "nganga" and are the ritual focus of Palo's magical rites and religious practice.

In my training I was told "Palo" means "wood" so I had to feel strong whilst doing the movements. The complex rhythms of the choreography in Palo is different to that of Orisha dances because the drum pattern is also different. In Palo, the dancers' backs are usually bent forward, often exceedingly low. There is constant action of all body parts moving with powerful and explosive jumps in between these movements. The dance is about the spiritual communication of male and female celebrating Palo's magical rites. Practising it over and over, I felt the transformation of dancing Palo; I embodied the dynamic movement material without looking like an outsider. When it came to the performance night there were guests from France and Germany in the audience who thought I was also a member of the dance Company as it looked like I had been dancing this number for years. Thanks to my tutors who taught me how to dance with conviction not only with my body but also with the expression in my eyes.

The highlight of learning this dance was dancing with such a great ensemble of dancers. I was lead by great example of how the character Palo should be portrayed. Wide eyes and a stern trance-like state of being felt like I was suppose to make the audience feel stunned.

## Orisha Dances

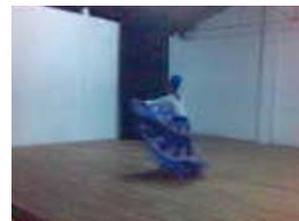
### Week 4

Elegua (male/female) can be seen as a playful and mischievous child. As an adult he opens and closes the roads of life. He wears red and black clothing and holds a branch of a small tree; his movements are small scaled and irregular. I learnt elements of elugua dance technique and saw the company dance a series of solos depicting the gods and goddesses in honour of all the Orishas. This was very educational and I could see how the character elegua acts out his mischievous ways; his body is low to the ground and gestures shift and change quickly. "Olubanche" is the main step of elegua, which is open and close the arms as if pulling something with the stick. Cha cha lo kafu is the step of riding a horse. (Whenever I travelled around the town on a horse and carriage, the driver would shout out "Elegua" for the horse to move).

Elegua is one of the dances I see younger kids enjoying more as it is about having a playful and lyrical energy.



## Yemaya



### Week 5&6

Yemaya is the Goddess of all the Orishas and the goddess of the ocean. It was a dance I learnt and performed as a solo in week 6. The movement and technique demands a lot of repetition keeping low and the torso forward. The dance of Yemaya is a call and response. The singer calls out a name in the song, which changes the drum rhythms and signals a change of movement for the dancer. The dancer has to listen out for the change in the song very carefully as the signal is sometimes very subtle. During the anti-climax of the dance the dancer must listen to the signal of the drumming which speeds up and becomes louder.

There are five techniques of Yemaya put together for the choreography. These are:

1. Yokota - which signifies collecting water. The dancer wears a long skirt and both hands hold the bottom of it as the arms collect the water in a circular motion. The floor pattern is also circular, feet travels on an imaginary circular line.
2. Omoladde - swishing the skirt rapidly and bouncing as if playing with the waves of the sea. The chest pulsates to and fro but the shoulders must stay relaxed.
3. Chikine - movement travels forward with the feet lifting up and stamping through the water.
4. Chacha lo kafu - all the Orishas have their own version of this step. For Yemaya it is placing the right foot in front of the body and then sliding it back in line with the right foot. Alternate action with the left leg. This is a low position, which was difficult to master. It had a rhythm on its own without the drums playing.
5. Aro de Yemaya - an improvisation of all the steps in a circular motion. The skirt becomes the waves of the sea getting more and more vigorous.

It took two weeks to master the techniques of Yemaya; to evoke the soothing quality of the sea and gain a sense of divine force as powerful as the sea.

## Conclusions

### Lessons learned

The discipline of learning Afro-Cuban dance for the fellowship helped me to understand that it requires constant repetition of the movements to keep the body looking relaxed even while executing high impact dances. This was difficult to master and is an ongoing process. When you first learn a technique that is new to your body you naturally tense up until you become familiar with the steps. The beauty of seeing dance is when the dancer makes the dynamic movements seem effortless. Some of the feedback from my teachers was;

- "I am advancing in the techniques rapidly".
- "The dances need to be practised at home in your spare time to improve for class the next day".
- "Movements that you find difficult need to be repeated as many times as possible until you get them right".
- "You have a professional understanding of folklore dance".

The teachers' methodology was thorough. They would not move onto teaching a new technique until I embodied all the actions precisely. The problem was never in how long it will take me to grasp the movement vocabulary of each technique but in the delivery of the dance itself. To learn the soul of the dance demands not only practising everyday but also talking to people who are from the Santeria religion. This is what enriched my dance experience; trying to establish the link between Afro-Cuban culture and Cuban society as a whole. Being in Guantanamo, Cuba I was able to trace the historical roots of all the different types of Afro-Cuban dance forms and relate it to me practical experience with Danza Libre Company. Afro-Cuban dance will help to give young people order in their lives, as it requires enormous repetition. From engaging in a traditional and colourful dance experience, they will start to gain confidence as they learn about a fusion of cultures reflected through singing, dancing and drumming.



The Singers



Producer,  
Photographer &  
Technician



The Drummers



The Dancers

### Evaluation Methods

- Writing a daily journal of my work in the company.
- Video documentation of my progress from week 1 to week 7.
- Dictaphone - recording company of drummers playing and tutors giving feedback.
- Notation - Observing teachers' methodology.
- Interview - dancers, teachers and the director of Danza Libre Company.
- DVD production - teaching resource for promoting my fellowship of Afro-Cuban dance in Cuba.

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## Appendix A

### Itinerary Outlined

- Arrived in Havana 17<sup>th</sup> May 2006
- Watched dances at the Theatre National.
- Stayed with Yvonne - PR person of *Los Papines*.
- Drove to Pina de Rio - waterfalls and sightseeing.
  
- 24<sup>th</sup> May flew to Guantanamo
- Got settled into new accommodation
- Monday 29<sup>th</sup> - started rehearsing with Danza Libre.
  
- June 23<sup>rd</sup> Danza Libre Company took me on camping trip by the beach to perform for the weekend.
- Monday 26<sup>th</sup> - Returned from Camping trip.
- Friday 30<sup>th</sup> June - travelled to Santiago de Cuba for a weekend visit.
- Santiago School of Arts closed for the summer.
  
- Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> July back in Guantanamo - preparation for my solo dance. New teacher arrives.
- Final week with the Company.
- Monday 10<sup>th</sup> went back to Santiago to get souvenirs and postcards.
- 13<sup>th</sup> July - flew back to Havana. Made my final notes on the fellowship.
- 16<sup>th</sup> July - flew back to London.

## Appendix B

### Interviews

Alfredo Velasquez - director of Danza Libre.

**1. What is your choreography about?**

The different histories of the Santeria religion or the popular history like rumba, salsa, mambo and son.

**2. Who motivated you / what inspired you?**

My family encouraged me. I grew up in the countryside so it was complicated to study in the School of Arts in Guantanamo as I lived far away in Baracoa. My teachers motivated me but I rely on myself for inspiration.

**3. How many dancers, musicians are in the company?**

We currently have fourteen dancers, six musicians and three singers. There are 14 folkloric dances and 30 dances are contemporary in our repertoire.

**4. Is there a difference in learning the technique of folklore dance and the choreography of folklore dance?**

There is a difference. The folklore has its own style and steps but as a choreographer I add my own personal steps within folklore technique, which can also be contemporary movements.

**5. What would you say is the most important thing for me to take away?**

The folklore technique. It has its own style and is unique to Cuba for you to teach dance in the UK and the expressions of the body that contemporary dance gives you.