Harmony in Motion: Tracing the Evolution and Cultural Exchange of Afro-Cuban and Palestinian Folk Dances Through Time

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Executive Summary

Dance tradition amongst most cultures is presented as knowledge, expression, language, art, and history that cannot be lived without. Some cultures choose to keep their ancient dance traditions private while others share their dances with the public in hopes that it gains popularity and support within non-Indigenous communities. Within this thesis, there will be a breakdown of the research in a comparison and analyzation of dance within two cultures: Afro-Cuba and Palestine. When assessing these communities' dances, attention is focused on how these different cultural groups teach, share, or preserve their dance traditions. One must also note that these cultural dances are contemporizing with time. Therefore, it is important to include how these folkloric dances have adapted and are shown in concert dance, media, and more.

The folkloric tradition of Afro-Cuban dance is rich. Within the Afro-Cuban culture there is almost always a reason to dance: health, weather, a new baby on the way, protection, etc. The dances in the Afro-Cuban culture are heavily based on Lucumí a Yoruba religion. This popular African religion was brought to Cuba by enslaved West Africans. Those who are initiated into the Yoruba religion view the liveliness of God existing through separate entities called "orishas". Like Greek mythology, each of these orishas has their own duty or area of protection, form of expression, color, animal association, and movement quality. Therefore, dancers use their bodies to imitate all the characteristics and power of whichever orisha they choose. Chants and music have a crucial role in the dancer's movement choices, as the sound score can determine pace, texture, and character. Afro-Cuban dance, music, and song continue to be spread and utilized outside of Cuba through different cultural lenses, media adaptations, and more.

Palestine is popular for its "Dabke", a dance that combines circle and line dancing. Dabke is performed at large events and occasions, usually for celebratory and joyful purposes. For

example, the Dabke is almost always performed at wedding receptions. Dabke focuses on unity and rhythm, as dancers intertwine arms and stomp in an impromptu line or circle. The dancers will sing while live music is played to support them. Like Afro-Cuban folkloric dances, much of the history of the Dabke remains unknown. The Palestinian Dabke stands out the most compared to other Middle Eastern Dabke's, as Palestinians actively use the dance as a form of art activism. They use the Dabke, a dance full of love and community, to showcase pride in their national identity.

The love of dance that many cultures have invested in since the beginning of time must be shared, researched, and discussed by people outside of that culture. My research will add to a field that is extremely underrepresented in academia, as most scholarly reports on fine arts are about visual media, art, or music and tend to ignore the category of dance, especially dance that is not rooted as 'fine art' such as western dance. This report will shed light onto some cultural dance forms that are underrepresented and will explore the beauty of their culture through their ancient teachings, preservation, and adaptations.

Introduction

Hundreds gather around the Showalter Fountain, the heart of Indiana University's campus, to watch the dance of Yemayá on a First Thursday performance during early September. Yemayá, a Yoruba deity, is characterized by her role as a protecting mother and her relation to salt waters. As my professor, Beatrice Capote, moved to the songs and rhythms of Yemayá, she provided an opportunity to all to learn about the culture of Afro-Cuba. About a month later, Indian University (IU) came out with a video reel, highlighting the performance as well as the university's mission for diversity, inclusion, and education. As I watched the video and admired the work of my professor, I could not help but notice the comment section. "Here you go again,

celebrating diversity on campus while doing absolutely nothing to protect your most vulnerable students from discrimination and threats of violence." "Acknowledge the Palestinian students' right for safe haven and security." The comments kept coming, all about a student's recent racist and threatening TikTok towards a Palestinian neighbour and fellow IU student. Although the university never came out with a statement or reacted in any way to assist the Palestinian students of IU, I believe the post and dance of Yemayá did exactly what it needed to, protected those who needed it and provided a platform to voice one's concerns. Most certainly, the comment section could have been flooded with love and support for the dance, music, and culture, but this is the current unfortunate reality. Yemayá needed to care for the Palestinian people, and she did through dance.

Rarely are Afro-Cuban and Palestinian culture discussed in the same sentence as in the previously mentioned story, but they both happen to be important facets within my life experiences. Dance displays who I am as an artist, scholar, and human. Through my time at Indiana University, I have been fortunate to study Afro-Cuban dance. I have grown fond of the technique's storytelling elements; it has changed me creatively as a dancer. Dance eventually led me to study aboard in the Middle East. While I was abroad last semester in Israel/Palestine I was able to witness and partake in the powerful display of dance that is Dabke. When comparing these two dance forms you can look technically at the steps, rhythms, chants, music, and dancers to dissect all the similarities and differences of each entity. Having experienced both art forms, I recognized how much love and unity grew out of these communities when dancing and wanted to share this passion, as well as the eclectic knowledge I have acquired while attending Indiana University through my thesis.

For most cultures, dance is a critical form of knowledge, expression, language, art, and history. As indispensable as dance is to some, complications arise with the conservation of these dance traditions. Research shows that some cultures choose to keep their ancient dance traditions private while others share their dances with the public in hopes that it gains popularity and support within non-Indigenous communities. Cultural rights, traditional knowledge, and intellectual property are theories used by some cultures to determine whether they will share their forms of dance with the outside world. These theories can also be used in the dissection of dance traditions and will provide insight to break down the research in a comparison of dance within Afro-Cuban and Palestinian cultures.

When analyzing these communities many questions arise. How have these different cultural groups taught, shared, or preserved their dance traditions? Note that the aforementioned cultural dances are contemporizing with time. Therefore, it is important to include how these folkloric dances have adapted with time. How are they displayed in pop-culture, concert dance, media, and more? Who has the right to dance these dances? Have these folkloric dances evolved into movements of modern-day activism and politics?

By answering these questions through literary and case study materials, I hope to advocate for these specific dances that are less commonly spoken of, taught, or preformed. It is quite ironic, as many dances within the Afro-Cuban and Palestinian cultures are used to generate groundbreaking material but are hardly credited within the dance world. The love of dance that many cultures have invested in since the beginning of time must be shared, researched, and discussed by people outside of that culture BUT it also must never be stolen. My research will not only advocate for these dances but also add to a field that is extremely underrepresented in academia.

Literature Review

Traditional Knowledge & Traditional Cultural Expressions

Understanding the complexity of an individual's dance identity within cultural communities begins with understanding a culture's traditional knowledge. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) states that traditional knowledge is "broadly regarded as being part of the heritage of indigenous peoples, and of humanity. It is perceived as both the 'content' and 'systems' of knowledge that result from collective actions of indigenous individuals."[1] There are many ethnic communities, two of which I will later examine, where dance is heavily integrated into the traditional lineage. These dances form a system of language, through storytelling and emotion, that influence the daily lives of these communities. This point clarifies that the dance language of ethnic communities is traditional knowledge, passed down from generation to generation with the help of many societal members, specifically the elders. In the article, an emphasis is put on the important role of elders to "link" all the generations. Elders have a duty to "preserve, hold, and transmit knowledge" as well as protect this knowledge "according to the related ethical principles and provisions of customary law. "[2]

Traditional cultural expressions are a particular subset of traditional knowledge that strictly focuses on folkloric aspects of the culture. This can include art, music, symbols, designs, rituals, architecture, fables, dance and more. According to the WIPO, traditional cultural expressions are known to be the devices that convey the "core values and beliefs" of each

[1] Rama Rao and Jane Anderson ,"The Relationship Between Intellectual Property and the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions & Developments in Intellectual Property and Traditional Knowledge Protection." in *Traditional Knowledge & Indigenous Peoples*. Ulia Popova-Gosart, Organization (WIPO, 2010) 18-19.
[2] Rao and Anderson, "Relationship Between Intellectual Property," 101.

Indigenous community. Just like traditional knowledge, traditional expressions are cultural roots and rituals shared year after year to immerse individuals with past cultural experiences.

The literature on traditional knowledge typically falls on popular topics in academia such as climate change, agriculture, or medicine. Each of these examples of traditional knowledge are often compared to Western science and understanding, as there are many occasions in Western thought where the time-honored holistic way of living was ignored. In such examples, I would argue that the literature fails to integrate traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as they are so intertwined that you cannot study them independently of each other. This is because dance cannot be calculated or studied quantitatively for results, but it can be investigated qualitatively, particularly in terms of its social unity, preservation, and ability to provide grounds of hope for mankind.

Intellectual Property

Security practices are fundamental to both traditional knowledge and cultural rights. Before 2009, the intellectual property system gave protection to certain "inventions and original works" for certain periods of time. The World Intellectual Property Organization then decided to create a measure to protect Indigenous knowledge and rights by authorizing Indigenous communities to voice where, when, and how their Indigenous thoughts and expressions are utilized by peoples apart from their Indigenous community. The WIPO declared that this expansion of intellectual property granted protection over "traditional remedies and indigenous art and music against misappropriation and enable communities to control and benefit collectively from their commercial exploitation."[3]

[3] "Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property – Background Brief," WIPO, accessed September 5th, 2023, https://www.wipo.int/pressroom/en/briefs/tk_ip.html

With a growing world of technology, ethnic communities are flourishing with opportunities to digitally archive their knowledge and expressions. Training programs have been established that allow these communities to weigh the risks of exploitation that come with these technological advancements. WIPO recognizes the need for intellectual property systems to adapt to each case differently while considering the unique laws, needs, and customs of individual communities.[4] When looking at these intellectual property systems, you can divide cases into two categories: defensive or positive protection. Defensive protection aims to prevent outsiders from obtaining intellectual property rights over traditional knowledge or expressions. Positive protection authorizes Indigenous communities to manage the publication of their traditional knowledge so people can directly "benefit from its commercial exploitation."[5] These forms of intellectual property provide autonomy for all ethnological groups, an imperative accommodation after decades of never having a choice.

Non-Verbal Intercultural Communication

Like many other artistic forms, dance is a vehicle for human communication. The language of dance transmits ideas and stories through non-verbal gestures, interactions, and other forms of movement. Non-verbal communication does not have many rules, and ambivalence within this structure of communication remains high. As a third-party viewer, interpreting the language of dance can be cumbersome, as everyone's lived experiences contribute to their understanding of a dance practice or movement phrase. Wouldn't it be easier to blatantly state what the dance is about? The transactional model of communication aids in the explanation of this question as it dissects the motivation for all modes of communication. "People communicate to create relationships, form intercultural alliances, shape self-concepts, and engage with others

[4] Rao and Anderson, "Relationship Between Intellectual Property," 45.
[5] WIPO, "Traditional Knowledge."

to create community."[6] Dance is formed as communication within these communities and cultures for that subset of persons, not necessarily for an outside viewer to comprehend. Thus, dance as a language within a population supports the formation of one's cultural identity. Dance non-verbally presents social behaviors and acculturates members into the larger population.[7]

Obtaining and using cultural knowledge can be a complex and contradictory action, as expressed in previous literature. When examining another culture, the three ideals listed under intercultural communication competence are important to follow. First, develop an admiration for a culture which will result in motivation to discover more. The knowledge that is discovered informs us of differences in perception, values, and other important aspects of the culture. Lastly, obtain skills that allow you to capitalize on discoveries ethically and properly. Important skills include "ability to emphasize, accumulate cultural information, listen, resolve conflict, and manage anxiety."[8] Within each case basis, these principles remain at the forefront to properly convey themes and other findings within the research.

Embodiment Theory

An academic analyzation around the idea of dance as a practice has resulted in an elemental composition that makes up all varieties of dance/movement: space, time, energy, and relationships.[9] As scholars created this movement formula, they neglected to consider the abstract and cognitive elements that happen symbiotically with physical movement. Therefore, any inner feeling or notion becomes embodied knowledge. In her thesis "Dance as an Agent of Social Change," Dana Vanderburgh references a Danish dance scholar, Charlotte Nielsen, who

[6] Karen Krumrey, *Intercultural Communication for the Community College*, (2019) 14.
[7] Krumrey, *Intercultural Communication*, 42.
[8] Krumrey, *Intercultural Communication*, 47.
[9] "Elements of Dance," Ballet Hispanico, accessed October 2023, https://www.ballethispanico.org/images/Elements%20of%20Dance.pdf

proposed six embodied dimensions for humans.[10] Creative, sensing, social, moving, cultural and expressive were the bodily dimensions being investigated. Interestingly, Nielsen utilizes the traditional "elements of dance" while also bringing awareness to the effect that artistic embodied knowledge has on the experience of movement. Nielsen's dimensions embrace an earlier concept of the "mindful body." This term was created by anthropologists Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper-Hughes to tie the body and mind together within everyday life.[11] By fully participating within a dance practice, one can engage entirely with all dimensions of their "mindful body."

Communication is key within movement, especially when multiple dancers have a relationship to one another within space. Embodiment theory draws upon the cathartic relationship between physical movement and emotion, but also can explain how emotional energy can further communicate with the "other." In many cultures, dance is performed for spirits as a form communication for "ancestral ghosts." One must embody the notion of opening energy channels so spirits can "affect the bodies of persons through their minds."[12] Thus, the ability to transmit physical information from one embodied soul to another becomes a ritual. Strathern argues that embodiment gains more legitimacy with such rituals, as the physical movement relies on the "cosmos" and the "cosmos" is the perfect "setting" for embodiment to flourish.[13] In this view, embodiment theory assists cultures in the preservation of dance tradition, knowledge, and rights. As the body "objectifies" a particular experience within a set dance vocabulary, it can support "people's place in and identification with their environment and landscape, and hence their cosmos."[14] This concept contrasts the Euro-American, scholarly, high

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[10] Dana Vanderburgh, *"Dance as an Agent of Social Change: Embodying the Affective and Kinesthetic Feelings that Make Us Human,"* (M.A thesis, Indiana University, 2018) 30.
[11] Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart, "Embodiment Theory in Performance and Performativity," *Journal of Ritual Studies*22, no.1 (2008): 67.
[12] Strathern and Stewart, "Embodiment Theory," 68.
[13] Strathern and Stewart, "Embodiment Theory," 69.
[14] Strathern and Stewart, "Embodiment Theory," 70.

art, dissection of dance where movement is performed for physical potential and entertainment purposes.[15] Embodiment theory can allow a person to internalize and alter somatic experiences through their heart, mind, and soul, as well as relate to other bodies physically and/or spiritually. "Ancestors that are present and are witnesses to the act" that the embodied patterns of the past are today's cultural actualization.[16]

Methodology

Like many other dance scholars and anthropologists, my methodology utilizes techniques that are frequently employed within ethnomusicology and dance anthropology.[17] This thesis qualitatively compares two folkloric dance cases from various locations; Afro-Cuban and Palestinian dance. The personal effect that these dances have had on my life will contribute to the overall breakdown of components within these traditional forms. It is important to note that dance plays an essential role in my life and informs who I am as an artist, scholar, and human. Through my time at Indiana University, I have extensively studied Afro-Cuban dance. I have grown fond of the technique's storytelling elements, and it has changed me aesthetically as a mover. Dance eventually led me to study aboard in the Middle East during the Spring of 2023. While I was abroad in Israel/Palestine, I was able to witness and partake in the Palestinian debke, a powerful display of dance. When comparing these two dance forms one can investigate the steps, rhythms, chants, music, and dancers while simultaneously recognizing the similarities and differences within each entity. Having experienced both art forms, I recognized how much love and unity spilled out of these communities when dancing. I wanted to capture this passion for

[15] Vanderburgh, "Dance as an Agent of Social Change," 31.
[16] Strathern and Stewart, "Embodiment Theory," 70.
[17] Vanderburgh, "Dance as an Agent of Social Change," 49.

movement in my thesis, incorporating the eclectic knowledge I have acquired while attending Indiana University.

Using these two cases, I will conduct a thematic analysis of the dance forms. These themes only become relevant to the overall theoretical background and perspectives scholarly literature provides. With my literature review, I was tasked with defining theory and interpreting scholarly sources to become applicable for the general analysis of the cases. I will also be utilizing interviews as a form of case study. The interviews and my personal lived experience will provide an inside perspective and awareness to the study, while the literature affords reliability and validity of the research. Additionally, I will interview two dance pioneers working directly within the Afro-Cuban and Palestinian dance communities. These interviews will contribute an intimate and personal perspective that is not available from simple observing techniques. To maintain value neutrality, all questions asked of participants in interviews will remain open-ended, so my own opinion and other prejudices are not reflected. Within the interview, participants will be questioned on their personal and worldly knowledge of my overall topic as well as the themes within the cases. Interviews will aid in filling the gaps in the literature, as influential scholars and other prevalent dance figures frequently omit from voicing the stories of what some deem as “low art.”

Many cases across a wide plethora of platforms will be studied to truly discover where these traditional dances are employed. Within the case study dissection of the thesis, overall themes will be discussed and highlighted, further strengthening the cases and making use of the academic literature. The examination of historical and pedagogical techniques explains how these folkloric dances are continuing their legacy through dance elders’. Identity will be discussed regarding nationalism, gender, and religion. I will tackle the question of who can really

dance these dances. Lastly, representation in modern day culture serves as the final theme for the case study. I will investigate the definition and complex relationship between what is contemporary and what is folklore within the realm of dance.

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to address any challenges or weaknesses in the methodology. Choosing two cultural dance forms that I am familiar with, I run the risk of excluding other theories or folkloric dances that might negate the research. Underdetermination might be an issue, as I could miss a correlation or additional theme between these two cases. I have an extensive movement background, and within my collegiate career I have become confident in researching/reporting on dance within an academic setting. Therefore, my approach could be compromised by external influences and outside bias. During the selection process of academic works, I intentionally asked dance mentors, my interviewees, and other professionals for various scholarly sources as I did not want to compile research that favored my topic. There are few ways to quantitatively define dance as a means of cultural expression, so having a range of sources increases objectivity and aids in the elimination of bias. As an Asian-American artist, I recognize that I am not a part of either community I am researching, but I am going through extreme means to approach findings with a curious and respectful heart.

Case Studies

Afro-Cuba: Movement, Preservation, & Modification

AND one… And one… and one… The drums continue to play the traditional Afro-Cuban rhythms of Elegua, the messenger of the gods and bearer of crossroads.[18] I hear the chants start, my peers begin to clap the clavé, and I am happily struggling to find the perfect moment to

[18] Robert Farris Thomposon, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York, Random House, Inc. 1984) 19.

start dancing. The best way I can explain this feeling to non-dancers is pinpointing the perfect time to leap into that jump rope. Anticipation and anxiousness are present, but really it all comes down to trusting one's instincts within precision, rhythm, and tradition. A supportive room of dancers who are also struggling encourage me to make the first move, all while my professor and mentor, Beatrice Capote, stands in the corner blissfully watching us dive into our first experience with Afro-Cuban dance culture. Afro-Cuban dance came as an unexpected learning curve for me. I never thought I would be learning this style of dance in college, nor did I consider how much it would benefit me as an artist and human. Until ten years ago, my professor had the same mindset.

Beatrice Capote is a Cuban American contemporary dancer, choreographer, and educator. Within the dance industry she is known for her unique fusion of Contemporary dance forms using Afro-Cuban dance mediums. Throughout the past three years, I have skimmed the surface of knowledge within this traditional style. In an interview, I learned that Capote had a late start to her learning as well, unlike most members of this sacred community as they usually start learning from an early age. While perusing her master's for dance, she noticed that she was coincidentally incorporating movement vocabulary from the Afro-Cuban tradition into her solo choreography, even though she did not formally know the steps.[19] This act of unknowingly becoming tied to one's cultural movement can be analyzed through the theory of embodied knowledge. Yvonne Daniel's, dance anthropologist, authors a book titled *Dancing Wisdom* where she intensely studied how embodied knowledge is natural for most humans, but specifically those in the Afro-Cuban community. She states that dance teaches a,

> silent embodied knowledge: it goes beyond being informed by texts and written information. It is, in fact, the silence of this embodied knowledge- its implications, if you will- that assists you in believing that you know something without it being expressed

[19] Beatrice Capote, interview by Picabo Saunders, September 28, 2023.

> verbally. This method of knowing through dancing- through the body- compounds and verifies all evidence of how the social order functions and ultimately yields greater credence to the presumption that you know something about other cultures.[20]

Once this embodiment was fully brought to Capote's knowledge, she then went to Cuba for the first time in 2013. Upon her return, she became passionate about her culture and began taking classes in New York City from a well-known family friend, Yesenia Fernandez. Capote has a fond interest in learning the dances of Yemayá, as her grandmother always felt she was associated with this deity.

Within Afro-Cuban culture, there is a belief in gods or deities that are referred to as *orishas*. Each orisha are "personified elements of nature," all which also represent "numbers, colours, parts of the body, biological processes, animals, foods, work types," and more.[21] Most importantly, these orishas each have his/her own chants, dances, and drum rhythms.[22] During the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, from 1511-1868, Africans from Yoruba nations were enslaved and brought to Cuba. To keep their own West African traditions alive, Roman Catholic Saints were introduced, thus creating a "series of parallelisms linking Christian figures and powers to the forces of their ancient deities."[23] For example, the deity of Oshun was often linked to Sweet Charity, a title given to the Virgin Mary within the Cuban Catholic church. This fusion of religions resulted in what is now known as *Lucumí*. The Africans in Cuba not only acted out of survival instinct, but they adapted their belief system so it could be carried on through generations. JT Torres and Jill Crosby discuss how histories and stories are based on through movement within their article titled *"Timeless Knowledge, Embodied Memory".* Through their

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[20] Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Sophia Smith Fund of Smith College, 2005) 269.
[21] Namajala Roque Tené, *"Movement IS the Moyuba: Critical Orisha Dance Pedagogy"* (M.A Thesis, Duke University, 2021) 8.
[22] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 207.
[23] Thomposon, *Flash of the Spirit,* 17.

ethnographic research, they discovered dances as the basis for "stories of diaspora, movements of displacements, of mobile identity, and a collective remembering of history."[24] When analyzing the sacred knowledge of the Afro-Cuban traditions, Torres and Crosby discovered there is a multitude of ways in which their language is breathing. It is manifested through the body within music and dance, through the mind within memory, and through the mouth within song.[25] Within the cultural community, elders are responsible for teaching the younger practitioners. These young practitioners specifically reference people than are newly initiated into the Lucumí religion, some are initiated upon birth while others begin later. Orisha dance and other ceremonial procedures are taught through watching and then participating.[26] Not only is this traditional knowledge being taught by elders within the community, but Cuba has also integrated cultural arts within its education system from elementary to university levels.[27]
Daniel's notes that the "Cuban education paradigm seeks out, encourages, and supports in genuine action the development of the artistic dimensions of each student." [28]

Cuba has not always been so warm and accepting of the Afro-Cuban identity. During the Cuban Revolution in 1958, politics dramatically shaped Orisha dance. Castro aimed at manipulating Afro-Cuban culture to form a cohesive "national identity" for the state. In the thesis of Namajala Roque Tené, she discusses the folklorization process "in which religious practice that has been classified as folk tradition is reinterpreted and recontextualized as a staged and commodified folkloric performance."[29] This heavily politically process thus maintains

[24] JT Torres and Jill Flanders Crosby, *"Timeless Knowledge, Embodied Memory: The Performance of Stories in Ethnographic Research."* (Stichting Etnofoor, 2018) 41.
[25] Torres and Crosby, *Timeless Knowledge,* 45.
[26] Tené, *"Movement IS the Moyuba,* 55.
[27] Félix Masud-Piloto,, Wayne Smith, and Pablo A Fernandez. *"Afro-Cubans in Cuban Society,"* (Diálogo, 2001)
[28] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 264.
[29] Tené, *"Movement IS the Moyuba,* 13.

control over the body, identity, and preservation of such traditional knowledge.[30] The folklorization of Orisha dance was particularly impactful as the once improvised steps became codified into a technique, instructed in non-traditional spaces, and performed on stages.

With this recently developed, Western influenced, version of Orisha dance, Cubans began to transnationally migrate and adapt their cultural practices within a new environment except this time they could teach it to others and earn a living. To some religious community elders, this act of teaching to non-practitioners was disgraceful. Past experiences with "outsiders" have mostly resulted in behaviors of exploitation or destruction, thus leaving these leaders uncomfortable sharing their intellectual property with the world.[31] However, younger generations argue there are multiple motivations for people wanting to learn Afro-Cuban dance. Exercise, religious studies, cultural curiosity, dance studies, are just a few reasons one might want to experience the deep fulfillment of Afro-Cuban dance. Roque Tené's personal principal on Orisha dance pedagogy lies on the "recovery and revitalization of cultural knowledge embedded in Orisha dance" through "contemporary Orisha dance instruction methodologies and connecting the practice to the origin of Lucumí tradition."[32] Daniel's has a similar philosophy but focuses more on "individual empowerment" and the community in which the dance brings. She states that the embodied memory brings an "understanding of the cosmos" and its relation to the present, while also providing knowledge and experience on daily life situations.[33] My professor mentioned a similar metaphysical ideology during an interview.

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[30] Alexandra Kolb, *"Cross-Currents of Dance and Politics: An Introduction."* (Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2011) 1.
[31] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 253.
[32] Tené, *"Movement IS the Moyuba*, 69.
[33] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 252.

As a professional dancer, she grew up with the mindset that Afro-Cuban dance was considered an ethnic dance form that was not a professional course of study. Once she experienced the psychological and physical effects it had on her body, there was no going back. She began to fuse her past dance experiences with her newfound love for Orisha dance. The goal was to integrate the two seamlessly and then share it with dance students. Many asked her to just teach the codified Afro-Cuban modern dance technique that became popular during the Cuban Revolution. But she saw her work as a singular entity, a technique inspired by Graham and Horton (Western modern dance styles), but with a deep prominent focus on folklore. In 2018, she started to develop the vocabulary for this dance fusion called *Capotechnique*. She now teaches this melting pot of dance forms within the higher education setting and continues to adapt and edit the technique through every practice. Capotechnique importantly provided preservation for Afro-Cuban culture. Not only does the technique continue the tradition of preserving culture through embodied knowledge, but also physically and spiritually informs dancers about themselves as artists.

Throughout our conversation, we spent a great deal of time discussing the dichotomy between traditional and contemporary thought. After reviewing the literature, many Afro-Cuban scholars view the teaching of traditional Orisha dance within an academic setting as traditional. Capote offers a differing perspective, stating that everything educators "are doing now is the contemporary version of what was preserved. We [educators] are not doing anything original." From the room that it is learned, to the clothes on the back of multiple races and genders within the room, nothing about our present-day learning environment for Orisha dances is "like it was." Capote acknowledged the discomfort some may feel at times as they believe that these dances

only belong to black bodies. With a turn of her head and a sassy shoulder she exclaimed "these dances belong to everybody."

Capote continues to push the concept of contemporary Afro-Cuban dance through her choreographed works. In a piece titled *Crossroads in Conversation,* she transformed the concept of what Orishas could be. Most Christians have a stereotype of how Jesus appeared, and the same concept applies to the Orishas for followers of the Lucumí religion. In reality, no one knows what these "gods/goddesses" are, so "why not make the goddess Yemayá a tall white man!" Although this casting shattered typical gendered norms of Western culture, the Lucumí religion is unlike most and is not gendered. No matter what gender you are born or identify with, the deity you are initiated into for protection only pertains to your personality and psyche. If a male identifying person is initiated into Yemayá, during a ceremony dance the process of mounting (deity possessing human body) occurs. The male then transforms into the glorious feminine vitality that is Yemayá.[34] Although mounting is a crucial step for followers of the Lucumí religion, this step is only for religious purposes. When the dances of these deities are danced in a non-traditional setting, it is simply for dance and education purposes not tied to the religious connection.

Within the Yoruba religion there are over 400 Orishas, and three of these deities are important feminine powerhouses. "Ochún represents woman as the essence of young and vibrant female energy; Yemayá represents woman as the essence of mothering energy; and Oyá represents woman as the essence of female warrior or activist energy."[35] Whichever of these

[34] Beatrice Capote, interview, 2023.
[35] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 257.

female Orishas one preforms, there is a repetitive consensus through the religion and culture that the "female body is powerful, strong, and quite remarkable."[36]

This past semester, fall of 2023, I had the privilege to train the dances of Ochún under Professor Capote's instruction. A complex dance, Yvonne Daniel describes her as,

> "beautiful and smart, happy and loving, strong and shrewd. She has multiple gestures over a steady rhythmic foot pattern. Her dance teaches dancing believers to assert their own strength and ingenuities they learn to perfect her dance. They keep their feet constant in the pattern, no matter how wide, long, or narrow the space, no matter what other body parts are moving. Dancing Ochún teaches us to be spontaneous and intelligently creative on top of a steady secure pattern."[37]

Her dance is full of breath, light, and growth. Although her dance appears to flow with ease, it is extremely demanding for the dancer. One must sustain a relaxed chest, double bounce in the knees, and a reverberation through the upper spine, all with the understanding of complex rhythms and connecting spiritually to the chants. Not only is movement part of the characterizations but one must explore facial expressions and utilize props related to your deity such as skirts, fans, scarves, machetes, and honeypots.

The age of modern media has only enhanced the preservation of cultural knowledge surrounding Afro-Cuban culture. Moya Rodriguez, and expert in Afro-Cuban dance, depicts Ochún within a YouTube video. Covered in yellow, sparkling with jewelry, her effortless movement and bright smile depict the sweet river waters.[38] You can tell Rodriguez is a connoisseur, as her body and the drums are not two sperate entities but one unit. Media is also used as a tool for professional dance companies to display their take on folklore. Oyu Oro Afro Cuban Dance Ensemble, a New York based dance company, persists with traditional steps, music, and costuming just performed within a Western proscenium theatre stage.[39] On the other

[36] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 260.
[37] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 277.
[38] Moya Yusimi Rodriguez, *Orisha Oshun Dance from Cuba,* 2017.
[39] Danys Perez, ("LaMora", interview by Cultural Caravan TV, 2017) *Spotlight on Oyu Oro Afro Cuban Ensemble.*

side of the United States in Los Angeles, Contra-Tiempo Urban Latin Dance Theater is utilizing Afro-Cuban dances as just one of many movement vocabularies for their pieces. “Salsa, Afro-Cuban, hip-hop, and contemporary dance with theater, compelling text, and original music” all add to the multi-faceted and unconventional performance that Contra-Tiempo delivers.[40]

Afro-Cuban dance culture has taken flight into more than just the concert dance world but also has grown a popularity within your beloved celebrities or is exploited into your favorite TikTok dance. For example, Beyoncé has referred to herself as Ochún on multiple occasion within her *Black Is King* and *Lemonade* albums.[41] Music videos, lyrics, red carpet dresses, and Instagram posts all contain imagery and allude to the fact that queen B defines herself as mother Ochún.

Even though done in a positive light, celebrities like Beyoncé are commercializing folklore without providing the audience with historical context in where the concepts, music, and movement come from. Recently within the realm of salsa dance, a social dance originating from Cuba, partners have recently included flares of Afro-Cuban gestures when preforming within the competition setting. Although it is a modern adaption of Afro-Cuban dance, the tradition and origin from where the knowledge is sourced becomes lost. The cultural knowledge becomes tainted as knowledgeable Afro-Cuban movers watch carefully and recognize that these salsa competitors are “taking Elegua movements and they're doing it with a cheesy smile.”[42] Yes, the movement is different, fun to preform, and adds a certain pizazz that other competitors might lack, but crediting sources and histories is critical. Capotes notes that the infatuation with Afro-Cuban culture within pop media is new and many people genuinely don’t know where it’s from.

[40] Contra-Tiempo, *joyUs justUs*, (Urban Latin Dance Theater, 2018).
[41] Constance Grady, "Meet the African Goddess at the Center of Beyoncé's "Black is King", (*Vox*, 2020).
[42] Ernesto Y Denisse, (BIG Salsa Festival, New York City, 2023).

She expressed that "people that don't know…it's not their fault. And people that don't think about the value of it… it's not anyone's fault"[43] all we can do is continue to educate and provide a welcoming community for people to continue growing.

Palestine: Protection, Nationalism, & Unity

As a child, and still as an adult, I love weddings for the sheer fact that I get to groove with my people. Soulja Boy's hit "*Crank That*" blares through the speakers and a rush of people flood to the dance floor. This popular social dance for my generation is exactly what *Dabke* has provided for Arab generations, young and old, for thousands of years. The Dabke is a line or circle dance involving the stamping of one's feet. Arms of the dancers are interlocked. A skilled Dabke dancer called the *lawweeh,* will lead the line and serve as a quick improviser that helps carry along the line and change rhythm patterns.[44] Similarly to Afro-Cuban dances, chants and drum rhythms are associated with each of the 20 Dabke variations. The lawweeh must be able to pick up which variations and rhythms are being played to properly lead the group. This passionate and spirited dance serves as a symbol of unification, typically done at joyful occasions such as weddings.

The history of Dabke has a rich artistic and cultural heritage that extends thousands of years back to the Canaan civilization during the second millennium B.C. Historians believe the Canaaite's used ritual jumps to scare spirits and protect their crops. Some believe the stamping came from mud-stompers whose job was to keep the rooftops from cracking. Regardless of how the Dabke came about, it has flourished within the Middle East. Of all the Levantine countries, Palestine has wholeheartedly accepted the dance into daily life, not just special occasions.

[43] Beatrice Capote, interview, 2023.
[44] Cora Harris, "Dabke Dance: History, Types, Technique, Costumes & More," (*City Dance Studio,* June, 2022)

When I was abroad in Israel/Palestine, I bore witness to the joy this dance brings. For two weeks I stayed in the city of Hebron during the month of Ramadan and was able to experience the importance of Dabke to the people. Lara Sami Abu Ayyash, a 20-year-old Palestinian, has an underlying objective when instructing others. She aims to not only demonstrate the movement but to express the importance of Dabke's role within Palestinians communities. Her family has devoted their lives to sharing Dabke by establishing learning centres through summer camps to teach young children the tradition. Her brother, an expert in the form, teaches it "to anyone who wants to learn." In the streets, at their house, or in a school, this family's priority is making Dabke accessible to all, Palestinian or not.[45]

Al-Shamaliyaa and Al-Sha'rawiyya are two popular variations of Dabke practiced in Palestine. These variations are received as welcoming gifts to those returning from travel or any visitors at a Palestinian household. Non-residents of Palestine can clearly recognize the unity and solidarity within the dance. The harsh hit the ground is a sign of strength and determination. Within the chants of the Dabke, the lyrics express belonging to the Palestinian land. Dancing folk dance to prove one's belonging, identity, and nationalism has become a healing way to cope with the trauma Palestinians continue to experience. Lara Abu Ayyash discusses the considerable difference in Dabke pre vs post the creation of Israel in 1948 or what Palestinians call *al Nakba (the catastrophe)*. It was that year that Palestinians were expulsed from their homes. Abu Ayyash states that "Dabke became a form of national struggle." This struggle allowed residents to actively transmit their "folklore and heritage to future Palestinians, for fear of obliteration and loss, and to preserve their identity from extinction due to the invasion of different cultures."

[45] Lara Sami Abu Ayyash, interview by Picabo Saunders. 2023.

Most importantly, she states that "the attempts of the Israeli occupation to obliterate the Palestinian identity" were unsuccessful because of the pride, joy, and community Dabke brings.

Within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights there is the potential for dance to be interpreted within the document. Naomi Jackson, dance studies professor, notes three ways in which dance and human rights intersect: regulation/exploitation of dance by authoritative groups, victims' utilization of dance to heal from trauma/social exclusion/human rights abuses, and dance as a means of political protest or movement to fight oppression.[46] Since the beginning of al Nakba, the Palestinian Dabke has come to a crossroad with all three of these notions.

With the flood of European Zionist immigrants coming to Israel/Palestine during the 20th century, there became a need for a collective identity "linked to an ancient culture of Jews."[47] Jewish settlers began to draw upon the regions past folkloric dances of the Arabs, Druze, Yemenites, and more. Contests were held awarding prizes to scholars like Yardena Cohen who researched Palestinian rural communities and thus discovered "Israeli" dances. Books were even published like *Palestine Dances!* an instruction manual for the Dabke as it relates to Jewish folk dance.[48] Arab dances like the Dabke provided a distinct Eastern identity for the new Western immigrants of Israel. The tie these Zionists have to the Dabke only "authenticated their claims to territory within the Middle East" and specifically within Palestine.[49] Throughout time, Israeli society has continued to appropriate the usage of Dabke, recently within the concert dance scene. Israeli choreographer Zvi Gotheiner has created his own version of Dabke within a dance

[46] Naomi M. Jackson, "Dance and Human Rights", (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2022) 196.
[47] Nicholas Rowe, "Dance and Political Credibility: The Appropriation of Dabkeh by Zionism, Pan-Arabism, and Palestinian Nationalism," (*Middle East Journal*, Middle East Institute, 2011) 366.
[48] Rowe, "Dance and Political Credibility," 368.
[49] Rowe, "Dance and Political Credibility," 370.

narrative that addresses "conflict, community, and hope for peace."[50] Although Gotheiner states that he is simply admiring the rich Palestinian culture and promoting a binding community between Israelis and Palestinians, his process of sourcing information on the Dabke was unethical and therefore a misuse of cultural knowledge/property of Palestinian people. The early and wide exposure of Dabke so early on to many Europeans led most Palestinians to begin promoting the concept of *asalah* or a loyalty to the origin. Palestinians began to protest the "creative adaptation" of folkloric dances, such as Dabke, for all people within Palestine or outside. Nicholas Rowe, dance anthropologist, states that "Dabke was not valued as an evolving cultural medium that adapted to serve the needs of the community, but as a cultural essence that needed to be protected against corruptive foreign influences in order to distinguish the boundaries of the community."[51] This traditionalist viewpoint only lasted for so long within the souls of the Palestinian people as they saw the Dabke as a voice of change.

The process of reproduction, adaptation, and selection is an evolutionary algorithm that Rowe points out as a process in which "cultural change occurs and is sustained."[52] For the folkloric dance of the Dabke, political resistance to the colonial oppressor became an overarching and newly emerged theme for this dance. Instead of constant happiness and light-hearted hand holding, the Dabke "stomps became stamps of defiance, hops became leaps of emancipation through innovative expressive gestures of the torsos, arms, and head."[53] The new identity behind the Dabke allowed the Palestinian people to utilize the power of arts activism. In Dina Roginsky and Henia Rottenberg's book titled "Moving Through Conflict: Dance and

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[50] Scott Iwasaki, "Repertory Dance Theatre addresses conflict and hope with Gotheiner's 'Dabke'," (*Park Record,* 2017).
[51] Rowe, "Dance and Political Credibility," 377.
[52] Nicholas Rowe, "Post-Salvagism: Choreography and Its Discontents in the Occupied Palestinian Territories," (*Dance Research Journal*, Congress on Dance Research, 2009) 48.
[53] Rowe, "Post-Salvagism," 52.

Politics in Israel," they make note of young Palestinian singer, Mohammad 'Asaf winner of the TV show "Arab Idol" in 2013. Throughout his time on the show, 'Asaf expresses "protest against oppression, violence, and tyranny" constantly using his platform to call for "liberation and freedom" of his Palestinian family on the Gaza Strip.[54] 'Asaf also utilizes Dabke inspired choreography to effectively deliver his moving message to the viewers, receiving a staggering applause. Popular Arab band 47Soul makes use of their power in similar ways to 'Asaf. The band writes original songs combining Arabic scales with reggae, rap, and dancehall influence. The lyrics reflect the displacement and oppression of the Palestinian people. With each performance, the band's energy and pride for Palestine seems to awaken the crowd, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Band members repeatedly lead the crowd through Dabke during a song. At a performance in Boston (2019), journalist David Paradela notes the wholesomeness of strangers holding hands, celebrating a dance "deeply entrenched in Arabic history." He felt that it was a "moment of celebration, unity, belonging, and revolution."[55] These themes became transferable across the world, as dancing demonstrations opposing the Israeli occupation broke out in the spirit of the Dabke. In a small German town square[56], 20 Palestinians stir up a large crowd as they dance for their people (2020). Dance for their struggle. And dance to stay alive.

This thought that "dance can flourish in any society while human rights cannot"[57] continues to be demonstrated within Palestinian culture. Not only do Palestinians continue to adapt their folkloric dance styles through a shared media exposure, but the Dabke itself is constantly evolving in the fight against human rights abuses and can be viewed through a

[54] Dina Roginsky & Henia Rottenberg, "Moving Through Conflict: Dance and Politics in Israel," (*Routledge,* New York, 2020) 63.
[55] David Paradela, "Dancehall Dabke: 47Soul," (*Sound of Boston,* 2019).
[56] Haitham Abdelhadi, (Palestinian's dancing Dabke attract audience in Germany, 2020).
[57] Jackson, "Dance and Human Rights," 210.

contemporary lens. In this thesis, I am referring to contemporary as a "past/present fusion, or it may refer to the process of transcultural fusion."[58] Amateur dance groups form as clubs within colleges in the West Bank.[59] Young Palestinian dancers begin to draw upon folklore with their choreography. The dance scenes created by Palestine people begin enhancing the "dichotomy between modernism and traditionalism."[60] Interviewee Lara Abu Ayyash discusses how she has seen this contrast through Dabke dance styles and more. For example, Dabke is a dance for all: children, teens, adults, elderly.[61] Throughout history, there has been times of modesty and concern when it comes to this dance, often dividing a group of girls to dance together separately from a group of men. Lara emphasizes the importance of "the heritage of civilization" to the Palestinian people. With the progress of time, the modernization of the Dabke was inevitable. This is not only apparent in the dance itself, but also "there became different designs for the Dabke dance clothing." Modern day troupe such as the Jerusalem Dabke Group[62] are preserving the traditional character and form of it of the dance, embroidered clothing, head-ware, and hand accessories, all while competing and performing for thousands on concert and festival stages.

The spaces in which Dabke appears is extremely important for the sake of properly caring on the traditional knowledge and providing the Palestinian culture room to expand. Roginsky voices that,

> "space gains national meaning through dance in the sense of belonging to the place, "to this land", its landscapes, history and related experiences; it gains gender and national meaning through license to move freely, to be seen and to present the vital body or even the suffering and protesting body; and a universal meaning through the connection with art, symbols, and ideas, as well as through the performance and

[58] Rowe, "Post-Salvagism," 56.
[59] Najwa Adra, "Raising Dust: A Cultural History of Dance in Palestine," (*Dance Research Journal*, Congress on Research in Dance, 2022) 98.
[60] Adra, "Raising Dust," 99.
[61] Abu Ayyash, interview, 2023.
[62] MK Kassem, Performed by Jerusalem Dabke Group" (9th Annual Palestinian Festival, 2019)

> presentation of art as inseparable from life (and place) and as an expressive tool of identity, both social and political."[63]

Space is an expansive and progressive contemporized concept that encapsulates all that the Dabke can and will be for the Palestinian people. On the street for a protest, at a cultural immersion festival, or in the heart of Columbus, Ohio for a Palestinian wedding[64] the Dabke will live on because of the heart of its people.

Conclusion

Within both cherished folkloric dance styles, the aspect of community and compassion reign over these cultures through the artistic expression of dance. The musicality and rhythm required to accomplish both Afro-Cuban Orisha dances as well as the Palestinian Dabke, suggest roots for both cultures that originate in African culture. The irresistible African sourced drumbeats and chants dictate which dance steps and qualities to present through movement, all while emphasizing the experience of dance within both cultures. Dynamic and sometimes intricate footwork, frequent level change, and the use of improvisation within a set dance are other similarities amongst Orisha dances and the Dabke. Traditional clothing and props are utilized within both cultures through their dances and remain a part of the dance knowledge today. Both Afro-Cubans and Palestinians utilize folkloric dance to represent their identity and cultural ties to their respective nations. So much so that these dances are taught and performed at festivals and competitions that honour the intellectual property and traditional knowledge produced by these two heritages. Contemporary adaptations to these dances continue to develop through pop-culture, concert dance, and media.

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[63] Roginsky & Rottenberg, "Moving Through Conflict," 67-68.
[64] Mahdi Ibrahim, (*Palestinian Dabke - دبكة فلسطينية*., Columbus, OH, 2022).

Within these cultures, drawing upon their repression, political history, and isolation through dance to encapsulate all that has manifested within their societies for thousands of years is nothing but new. For those outside of these cultures, researching the process before capitalizing upon it is a crucial action that respects ethical standards. These folkloric dance forms are no longer considered low art to Western civilizations and have become popular within all parts of daily life, including music, dance, and clothing; the practicing artists must acknowledge a difficult dichotomy to preserve the form, narrative, and identity of the dances. Rachel Swain sums it up perfectly stating that artists that are "experimenting with method and form in a located cultural context are able to embody a sense of being both at home in oneself, the world, and alternately, or equally, not at home."[65] The embodiment of Afro-Cuban and Palestinian dance is carried on through its teachings, improvisation, social media, protests, weddings, festivals, theatres, music videos, and so much more. These dances are everywhere, these cultures are everywhere. It is just time we start to acknowledge these culturally rich artistic forms.

[65] Rachael Swain, "A Meeting of Nations: Trans-Indigenous and Intercultural Interventions in Contemporary Indigenous Dance." (*Theatre Journal,* 2015) 504.

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