

Puerto Rican Bomba Fashions: Consumption, Performance, and Meaning Making

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In many cultures, dance and music are more than just entertainment forms, but tools for uplifting commemoration, resistance, and resilience. In Puerto Rico, the folkloric music and dance genre called Bomba is renowned as a prominent tool for communicating messages of resistance against colonization and ongoing injustices in the island (Lebrón, 2021). The earliest records of Bomba date to the 16th century when the enslaved and free Black community of Puerto Rico originated Bomba as a way to express their lived experiences and escape the horrors of slavery. Derived from West and Central African practices, Black folks used Bomba for entertainment and sociopolitical purposes (Taylor, 2019).

Today, Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean groups still practice Bomba to organize, mobilize, and support community needs as well as preserve the tradition. Bomba gatherings and performances are still spaces for entertainment, liberation, resistance, and community. There are different elements unique to the Bomba genre (Escuela de Bomba y Plena Tata Cepeda, n.d.). The instruments of Bomba are the barriles (the drums), the cuá (two wooden sticks), and maracas (Abadía-Rexach, 2019). There are two types of drummers: *el buleador* and *el primo*. Buleador drummers maintain a steady rhythm throughout the performance. The primo's role is to follow the dancer's moves by striking the drum as a response to the dancer's movements called *piquetes*, which can be done with the dancer's skirt, hands, shoulders, or feet. This dynamic between drummer and dancer is often described as a rhythmic conversation (Gudiño-Cabrera, 2017). Bomba songs follow a "call-and-response" composition where the singer sings a verse and others respond with the chorus (Maldonado, 2008).

Though some fashion scholars have written about Puerto Rican dress (Blanco & Vázquez-López, 2012; Vazquez Lopez, 2005), Puerto Rican Bomba dress as a tool for meaning-making has had little attention. Independent scholar, Melanie Maldonado (2008, 2019) analyzed Bomba's folkloric costume using Black feminist thought, and wrote about the Bomba petticoat as a means of empowerment for women in Bomba during the 20th century. However, more exploration is needed to further appreciate and understand the history and contemporary relevance of Bomba fashions. Thus, the purpose of our research is to understand the deeper meanings and use of Bomba fashions in the context of Puerto Rican identity, space, and place. To guide our research, we used the following research questions: (1) How do Puerto Rican Bomberos embody and negotiate identity through Bomba dress? (2) How and what meanings do individuals and/or society form about Bomba dress? (3) How does Bomba and Bomba dress inform Puerto Rican experiences and concepts of space and place? And (4) How does the consumption, distribution, production, and regulation of Bomba dress intersect with notions of authenticity and meaning making? For this study, we analyzed Bomba fashions, as well as their usage, meanings, and interpretations through a symbolic interactionist lens (Kaiser et. al, 1995). We collected oral histories with 15 Puerto Rican Bomba practitioners who have participated in Bomba performances in the last five years. In addition to oral histories, we also conducted ethnography where the first author visited Bombazos and public spaces where Bomba is practiced. Part of the oral history also included a photo elicitation process where we asked

participants to bring photographs of themselves wearing their preferred Bomba style attire. To analyze the data collected (transcript, photographs, videos), we used a grounded theory approach where we used open, axial, and selective coding to develop themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

It was evident from the oral histories that the bomberos had a *rich connection to Puerto Rican identity and its related meaning making*. They felt pride and connection to their roots despite facing stigmas and discrimination. Authenticity become a challenge for many as they navigated societal perceptions. Puerto Rican identity transcended mere birthplace. That is, it is rooted in knowing, appreciating, and actively participating in cultural traditions such as family interactions, cuisine, music, and dance. The bomberos also expressed *multiple and varied bomba ways of knowing*. That is, they shared bomba knowledge in various spaces and forms. They described unique ways in which Bomba knowledge is acquired and transmitted, emphasizing the oral and embodied nature of this cultural tradition. Also, seamstresses, community gatherings, and academies emerged as significant sources for disseminating information about dance styles, rhythms, regional variations, and costumes.

They also expressed that there are *varied bomba styles with much influence from different places and spaces around the island*. They explained regional styles and rhythms in Bomba vary, reflecting the distinctive ways in which the genre developed in each locale. Seamstresses from different regions, depending on their social status, contributed unique elements to the Bomba dress. For instance, Black women in Cangrejo, being free, learned to sew and create their own dresses according to the fashion and political influences of the time. The Cepeda family is highlighted for their significant influence on the development of Bomba and its dress.

They also heavily discussed *consuming bomba styles and embodying bomba styles*, which had much emphasis on *authenticity*. They said Bomba dress making was once a commonplace skill, with most women acquiring and practicing sewing and dress-making as part of their daily lives. The knowledge and skills required for Bomba dress making were often passed down through generations, emphasizing the importance of preserving and teaching this craft to new generations. There was a notable opposition to mass-produced products within the Bomba community. The meaning assigned to Bomba dress varied significantly among practitioners, regions, and generations. For some, wearing the traditional dress evoked pride, a connection to national/racial identity, and a sense of honor. However, not all practitioners ascribe meaning to the dress, focusing instead on the significance of dance execution and communication between the dancer and drummer. Last, there was much discussion surrounding *bomba and society*, in particular, the messages they believe society portrays about bomba. Within the broader societal context, they explained that Bomba serves as a cultural symbol, reflecting the values and aspirations of Puerto Rican communities in the island and diaspora.

Overall, Bomba, the Afro Puerto Rican genre that centers on rhythmic conversations, which encompasses varying dress, serves as a symbolic interaction conveying stories of lament, joy, anger, and resistance between the dancer, audience members, and musicians. The bomberos face challenges navigating authenticity within societal perceptions, emphasizing the oral and embodied nature of Bomba's cultural transmission. Using a symbolic interactionism lens, the bomberos create varied meanings for Bomba dress, with some emphasizing pride and national identity, while others prioritize the significance of dance execution. The opposition to mass production underscores a commitment to their perception of authenticity, and in the broader societal context, Bomba serves as a cultural symbol reflecting the values of many Puerto Rican

people. Through our findings, we highlight the nuanced meanings attached to Bomba dress and fashions, emphasizing the importance of authenticity, cultural transmission, and the role of Bomba as a cultural symbol that reflects the values and aspirations of the varying Puerto Rican population. Our work can contribute to cultural competence surrounding Puerto Ricans in the 21st century, which ultimately can help humans interact with increased empathy towards one another.

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