

Movement IS the Moyuba

Critical Orisha Dance Pedagogy

by

Namajala Naomi Milagros Washington Roque Tené

Dance Program
Duke University

April 15th, 2021

Approved:

Ava LaVonne Vinesett, Committee Chair

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Michael Klien, Committee Member

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art in the Dance Program of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In Cuban Lucumí practice, the Orisha are deities in a divine hierarchy. My artistic research showcases the development of my critical Orisha dance pedagogy as facilitated in a two-day event entitled the *Orisha Dance Fête*. Contemporarily, Orisha dance can be edified in two distinct contexts: the studio/folkloric context and the ceremonial context. Methodologies for instruction and dissemination of Orisha dance are influenced by social, cultural, and political events and processes in Cuban and U.S. American history. Yet, within these historical processes, dancers, instructors, and practitioners have continuously developed and negotiated the terms by which Orisha dance and Orisha ceremonial movement are taught either in the studio/folkloric context or in the ceremonial context. My research investigates the development of the Lucumí practice in Cuba and the development of Orisha dance in Cuba and the United States. My research uncovers the complexities involved in negotiating the instruction and dissemination of Orisha dance and Orisha ceremonial movement and questions by elevating the voices of Lucumí practitioners and Orisha dance instructors, students and performers. The development of my critical Orisha dance pedagogy in the *Orisha Dance Fête* employs multiple methodologies and ways of knowing, inspired by academic research methods, dance practice, Lucumí religious and other spiritual practices. The result is pedagogy that implements studio/folkloric and ceremonial methodologies for teaching Orisha dance and student-centered methodologies for supporting a dancer's self-awareness and engagement with their co-presences and the Orisha. I believe that when taught within and regarding

the cultural and religious framework of Lucumí, Orisha dance has the potential to transcend the simplicity of its practice as a folkloric dance form and can become a practice that supports a dancer's awareness and assimilation of the spiritual aspects of their personhood.

Dedication

For my People. Seven generations back. Seven generations forward.

Acknowledgements

I am a divine spark of the Great All, of God Him and Herself. I am the manifestation in the flesh of each of my ancestors' prayers, triumphs and difficulties. I am the daughter of Sarah Milagros Roque and Donald Dimitrius Washington, whose DNA has given me life. I am the precious cargo of the Orisha, angels and spirit guides who walk with me. *Moyuba*, I pay homage to them all, for I am clear that without them, I do not exist. This work does not exist. It is with their love, guidance, lessons and protection that this work has come into fruition.

To my *Madrina* Iyá Nina Grillo-Balthrop Mack, for whom this acknowledgement section was decidedly included, I am eternally grateful for you. This thesis does not exist without you. Your grace, dedication, obedience and love of our religion brought us together and your support of me throughout these past few years in unequivocal. THANK YOU! Thank you for being part of every step of this thesis this year. From opening my pathway to *Ochún* to identifying interlocutors, supporting my spiritual work with cleansings and the like. For the integral role you played at the *Orisha Dance Fête*, event set up and break down and teaching participants and holding ceremonial space as an elder practitioner. For pointing me to practitioner scholars whose work does not show up in the academic sphere. For reading, editing, and checking my work for cultural and religious accuracy and respect. There is no payment grand enough for your support. I pray that your *Egun* and Orisha bless you with consistent abundance across this lifetime and the next.

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To my secondary advisor J. Lorand Matory. You have been a gift to me in my academic pursuit of our religion. You are a gem in the academy and bring honor and respect to our practices. To all the faculty and staff of the Duke dance program, I am grateful for all the administrative, personal and academic labor you have contributed to my journey in this inaugural MFA program. To my cohort mates. We DID this. I am grateful for your friendship and sisterhood as we have all embarked on deep academic and personal work together. And to all of my family, my sisters and friends. Thank you for your listening ears, for your prayers, for your financial support, for your care and for your love. This work, though it bares my name is the product of a huge, beautiful and fortified community. It is our work.

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Orthography

I acknowledge that the written word does the job of perpetuating specific cultural values, and within the scope of my work, attempt to acknowledge the complex social, political, religious, and economic realities embedded in the proliferation of the Lucumí practice via Orisha dance. With my positionality as a practitioner of Lucumí who received my first initiations in Cuba and as someone with solid ancestral ties to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean through my mother, I am poised to privilege the Cuban-Spanish-derived terminologies associated with the tradition. My privileging starts with the term Lucumí. Lukumí means “my fellow countryman.” The term Lukumí was originally used as a greeting but is now used as a name for the religious and cultural tradition that is sometimes referred to as Santería or *Regla de Ocha* (Rule of Ocha).¹ For some, these terms are interchangeable, but regarding my lineage in practice, I use the term Lucumí; the spelling with a “c” instead of a “k” is derived from the Cuban-Spanish spelling of the word Lukumí. Furthermore, when naming each divinity or Orisha in this work, I use the Cuban-Spanish spelling with appropriate accent marks. It is important to note that Lucumí not only refers to a specific religious and cultural tradition, but an ethnic group and oral tradition. This oral tradition is actually a specific dialect of what is now recognized as Yoruba language, but developed in Cuba before that ethnic identifier

¹ Ramos, *Lukumí Ordination Seminar*.

was in use. As a result, Lucumí the dialect, can be considered a creolized version of modern-day Yoruba language, with the influence of Cuban Spanish.

Though it is not commonplace in academic writing, I refer to the divinities as “Orisha,” which is the English spelling and written with a capital “O” to denote naming as a proper noun and reflect my respect for the divinities. None of these spellings has much consequence in my arguments, though they do, as mentioned before, point to my positionality and are worth mentioning for the sake of my readership.

Introduction

The first time I ever performed an interpretation of an Orisha was frightening and magical. I trained with my instructor in public classes and private lessons for months in anticipation of that day. Right from the start, I questioned what it would take to embody the grandness that is *Yemayá*. As an initiated Orisha practitioner, or *aborisha*, for only two years at that point, I had been taught to respect this earthly manifestation of the Divine Mother as a feminine energy that has the power to destroy and nurture life. I learned as a mother, *Yemayá* is stern yet kind. I was told I could find her in the waves of the ocean, in the mysteries of the number seven, in the depths of the color blue, and wherever mothers exist. In my training, I was encouraged to study these mysteries as a way to inform my movement. I had to integrate, embody and portray, as I understood them to be, the nurturing and protective qualities of motherhood, the gentle ripples of ocean waves, and the depths of the color blue. I had to connect to *Yemayá* within me, connect to the music that surrounded me, and facilitate the audience's connection to *Yemayá* with my performance. Still, even though I studied the mysteries and practiced consistently, I was nervous about my ability to embody the many aspects of *Yemayá's* character and transmit *Yemayá's* essence in performance.

As I put on my costume, my friend and now *Madrina* Iyá Nina Grillo-Balthrop Mack (Priestess of the Orisha *Ochún*) zipped me into my dress, we both got chills. Something was happening. I waited nervously at the edge of the outdoor stage. The *batá* drums began, the singers started to sing, and then it was my cue to enter. At the beginning

of the performance, I was worried about the dance technique and the music's timing. My head was a flurry of thoughts. Was I going to miss the transition between rhythms? Could I remember the counts for the choreography? Was I going to roll my shoulders back enough, release my chest deeply enough and circle the waves of the skirt with enough fluidity? A third of the way through the performance, I felt moved to surrender. I could no longer allow my panicked thinking to drive my performance. I just had to feel and let the music guide me to connect to the manifestations of *Yemayá* as I had been taught. I trusted the energy encircling me, even though I was still uncertain of the energy encircling me and what exactly it was doing to me. Was the energy I felt *Yemayá* herself? It didn't matter. I had to keep dancing.

I finished the performance knowing I had made a few mistakes. But the audience clapped and looked at me in awe, and I thought, "Maybe I did do something right?" Later, after the performance, I asked my mentor, "Did it look as bad as I thought it was?" She replied, "No, not at all. Yes, just a few places that one who knows the details of the technique would pick up, but you brought Her here. We all felt the presence of our Divine Mother amongst us, and that is no easy thing to do."

Her statement left me feeling a bit better about my performance, but it also puzzled me. I wondered whether my surrender made it possible for me to bring *Yemayá* through in the performance. I wondered if my performance was successful because of a combination of the singing and the drums that raised the energy and allowed her to emerge. Most of all, I questioned the importance of technique, a very physical aspect of

the performance, in the context of such powerful spiritual forces and embodied experiences. After my first performance, I continued to practice Orisha dance and trained as an initiate of Lucumí. Through those experiences, my questions have only deepened and fused to form the scholarly curiosity, cultural care, spiritual explorations, and respect embedded into this project.

My artistic research serves the specific purpose of developing critical Orisha dance pedagogy that integrates contemporary studio/folkloric Orisha dance practice into the Lucumí ritual and ceremonial practice from which it comes. Orisha dance is a sacred movement technology in the Cuban Lucumí cultural and religious tradition. However, Orisha dance is currently practiced in two distinct settings, the studio/folkloric setting and the Lucumí ceremonial setting. Chapter 1 traces the emergence of the Lucumí tradition in Cuba and details how Orisha dance was extracted from its religious context and transformed into folkloric technique through the folklorization process. This politically imposed process forced the development of two unique trajectories for teaching and performing Orisha dance, the new studio/folkloric methodology and the ceremonial methodology. This chapter also details how folkloric Orisha dance was transported to and adapted in the United States.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the methodologies I used in the development of my thesis. It highlights the interdisciplinary approaches used throughout my process, which include academic methods, artistic methods and spiritual methods, to produce this thesis project. Chapter 3 is an ethnographic account of contemporary Orisha dance

pedagogy. I highlight opinions amongst practitioners and scholars about the potential of the human body in Lucumí. I also draw from interviews done with Lucumí practitioners and Orisha dance students, instructors and performers to discuss the costs and benefits of the methodologies used to instruct and perform Orisha dance in both the studio/folkloric setting and the Lucumí ceremonial setting.

Chapter 4 exposes the development of my Orisha dance pedagogy. Through engagement with the work of dance scholars, I situate my pedagogy within contemporary conversations within dance studies about critical dance pedagogy, which values student-centered and non-authoritarian teaching. I firmly state my beliefs, that have emerged from my study of Orisha dance. I demonstrate how my beliefs manifested as the integration of studio/folkloric practice and ceremonial practice in pedagogy throughout every aspect of the *Orisha Dance Fête*. In chapter 5, I share the experiences of participants in the *Orisha Dance Fête*. And chapter 6 offers my conclusions and musings towards future praxis.

As a practitioner, dancer, and scholar, I am at the center of my artistic research. Anything that I seek to share by way of written work or artistic production must first be received, integrated, and channeled through me as a vessel. With this truth, I acknowledge that my artistic research is a spiritual and divine co-creative work. The *Orisha Dance Fête*, my two-day Orisha dance event is praxis. It is the combination of my research about Orisha dance with the practice of informed methodologies for teaching Orisha dance. It demonstrates that when taught within and with respect to the cultural and

religious framework of Lucumí, Orisha dance has the potential to transcend the assumed simplicity of its practice as a folkloric dance form and can become a practice that supports a dancer's awareness and integration of the spiritual aspects of their personhood. *Moyuba* in the Lucumí practice is a word used both in prayer and as a prayer giving homage to ones *Egun* and Orisha. In its transcendent form, Orisha dance is a prayer made by the dancing body to give homage to all that we are and all of the *Egun* and Orisha and divinities that support us. I invite readers of this interactive written work to read, watch (all videos referenced have links in the footnotes), listen, and engage with the experiences offered herein at the level of the body.

Chapter 1: Historical Framing and Context

1.1 Introduction

“Make sure you listen to the drum,” says master-instructor Oscar Rousseaux Pons as he points to the three musicians at the front of the room. All of the students look to the front of the room; some wear a smile and make eye contact with the musicians, and others show blank faces. Listening to the drum also means acknowledging and building relationships with the musicians who bring forth the rhythm and sing the songs to which we will move our bodies. Out of our self-consciousness, most of us will choose not to look at the drummers again for the remainder of class, missing the opportunity to enrich our dance class experience with a sense of engaged community.

This Afro-Cuban folkloric dance class takes place in a small capoeira studio in a quiet neighborhood in Washington, D.C. The space is narrow, with just enough room to fit about 10-12 students in the weekly Wednesday night class. Tonight, Oscar, the instructor and a graduate from the Escuela Nacional de Intstructores de Arte in Havana, Cuba, teaches us the dances of the Orisha *Elegguá* to live *batá* drumming. We learn *Elegguá* uses a *garabato*, a stick in the shape of a number seven, to open and close the pathways. We understand he is a trickster, and he can be pretty playful. We learn that in ceremony, he is the first Orisha to be acknowledged. And we dance. We embody the information shared with us to the best of our ability as we try to recreate the steps master-instructor Oscar teaches.

Master-instructor Oscar's class is unique in Washington, D.C.; it has been ongoing consistently for about seven years. There have been other Afro-Cuban folkloric dance classes in the past that ran for a while, but they stopped after a year—if they even lasted that long. Occasionally, one can attend one-off classes during salsa, bachata, or Cuban dance festivals.

Yet, master-instructor Oscar's class is not so unique on a national scale, where, especially in many major cities along the East Coast, one can find Afro-Cuban folkloric dance classes taught by Cuban trained dancers. Classes such as master-instructor Oscar's, that feature Cuban trained teachers are possible because of the emergence of a studio/folkloric Orisha dance technique. The studio/folkloric technique exists because of complex religious, social, cultural, political, and economic history spanning the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, colonial encounters between Africa, Cuba, Europe, and the Americas, the Cuban Revolution, and transnational migrations.

1.2 Africans and the Emergence of Lucumí in Cuba

1.2.1 Lucumí Cosmology

"If you ain't got God in your life, you ain't got Orisha. When I say God, I mean *Olófin, Olódumare*. He paves the way for us to do this. And if my faith is not big in Him, there is no *Yemayá*; there's no *Shangó*, there's none of that. There's only *Olódumare*, understand?" This quote from Babá Tony "Yemayá" Domenech gives a brief overview of Lucumí cosmology. Babá Tony is a priest of *Yemayá*, of Puerto Rican heritage born and raised in New York. As an elder practitioner, dancer and instructor, Babá Tony has

learned to work within the Divine hierarchy of Lucumí and share it in a relatable way with others.

In Lucumí, there is a Divine hierarchy where the ultimate creative force *Olódumare*, the one God, rests at the top. *Olódumare* is followed by the Orisha and *Egun*, or ancestors. Folklore scholar and priest in the Lucumí tradition, Michael Atwood Mason, further elaborates: “Each Orisha represents a different facet of the Creator God, and so by worshipping the Orisha, people are worshipping the High God. The overarching God called *Olódumare*, *Olófin*, or *Olorún* established the order of the universe but is now essentially uninvolved in human affairs except before birth or after death. However, he left the universe in the hands of the divinities called Orisha.”¹ The innumerable divinities, aspects, or Orishas that *Olódumare* divided itself into are “each a living, spiritual personification of limited *aché*. The *aspect of Olódumare* determines the *aché*, or essence, of each Orisha that it was birthed from.”² Typically, the aspects are personified as elements of nature: the ocean, the highest mountains and holy places, the cemetery, the forest, or the river. Each Orisha is also a living manifestation of different numbers, colors, parts of the body, biological processes, animals, foods, and work types. Each

¹ Mason, *Living Santería*, 8.

² Lele, *The Secrets of Afro-Cuban Divination*, 1.

Orisha has devotees. And most importantly for this investigation, each Orisha has its own collection of music and dances.

The intermixing of Indigenous, African, and European cultures, religions, and peoples is no secret in Cuba. It is an integral part of the Cuban national identity. The song “Lamento Yoruba” by Cuban musician Alexander Abreu expresses Cubans' historical and cultural stories about their origins and cultural identity. In the music video³, Abreu (a trumpeter and *Babalawo*, high priest in Lucumí), sings and plays amid images of the colonial-slave experience in Cuba – an Orisha dancer twirling and dancing in ode to *Yemayá*; images of the enslavement of Africans; and images of statues and ceremony clearly indicative of Lucumí, or any of the concretized Afro-Cuban religions and spiritual practices. At 1:13 Abreu sings: “Una guerra sin sentido. Termina en esclavitud. Latigo y cepo brutal. Dolor en los barracones. Y desde entonces el color se dividió en posiciones. Blanco a los grandes salones. Negro pa'l cañaveral.” which translates to “*A war for no reason. Ends in slavery. Lashings and brutal stocks. Pain in the slave quarters. And since then, color (of one’s skin) divided into positions. Whites in the grand ballrooms. Blacks to the sugar cane fields.*” At 2:26 the song continues with the chorus: “Yoruba soy, oh Lucumí! Soy español, soy cubano, Congo y Carabalí,” meaning, “*I am Yoruba, oh Lucumí. I am Spanish, Congo and Carabalí.*” In “Lamento Yoruba,” the performers exemplify an intermixing of peoples and cultures from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

³ Abreu, Alexander. “Lamento Yoruba.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgRZxcBUGbk>.

The song's lyrics and music video demonstrate the porous nature of cultural identity developed in Cuba during the colonial-slave era. Specifically, they reference the porous and adaptable nature of Afro-Cuban's religious and cultural identity, a nature that would lead to the development and prominence of the Lucumí practice.

Scholars of the Lucumí practice tend to credit Yoruba people as being predominant among Cuba's enslaved population; they might briefly insert that "Lucumí is a practice derived mostly from the Yoruba people of Nigeria." J. Lorand Matory, in his work *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, asserts that African ethnic identities are not coeval with their Afro-Atlantic diasporic.⁴ This means that the ethnic identities of the enslaved Africans brought to Cuba do not neatly correspond with the identities that their descendants claim today. The identity most claimed is the Yoruba identity. Matory, in his work, describes in great detail the emergence of the Yoruba identity in the Afro-Atlantic diaspora and asserts: "African agency and African culture have been important in the making of African diaspora culture, but more surprisingly, the African diaspora has at times played a critical role in the making of its own alleged African 'base line' as well."⁵ With this truth, in this short section on Africans and the emergence of Lucumí in Cuba, I only attempt to capture the diverse ethnic and cultural elements that have contributed to the development of Lucumí practice in Cuba.

⁴ Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 39.

⁵ *Ibid*, 39.

From 1511-1868, Africans from the present-day Yoruba nations of southwest Nigeria, ancient Dahomey, Togo, and Benin; the Carabalí nations of Eastern Nigeria and Cameroon; the Arará; Ewe and Fon nations of Dahomey and western Nigeria; as well as Africans from the nations in and around the Congo basin; the Mandinga people from upper Niger, Senegal, and Gambia valleys; and the Gangas people of Sierra León, amongst others were enslaved and transported to Cuba as property during the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade.⁶

Despite heavy indoctrination attempts by the Spanish Catholic Church, the African people in Cuba did not wholly divorce themselves from their homelands' spiritual, cultural beliefs, and identities. To maintain their relationships with their God, their Divinities, and their sacred cosmologies, the enslaved Africans found ways to survive and strategically developed ways to adapt their cultural spiritual practices to the colonial-slave environment.

These spiritual and cultural adaptations have manifested in the Lucumí practice and highlight African people's ingenious nature in Cuba. According to George Brandon in his work *Santería from Africa to the New World*, Lucumí is a cultural and religious practice with traces of various spiritual and religious traditions. "Santería is a New World neo-African religion with a clear dual heritage. Its component traditions include European Christianity (in the form of Spanish folk Catholicism), traditional African Religion (in the form of Orisha worship as practiced by the Yoruba of Nigeria), and

⁶ Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 264.

Kardecian spiritism, which originated in France in the nineteenth century and became fashionable in both the Caribbean and South America."⁷ In their book *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*, Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert agree that "more than simply a strategy for survival, the dynamic, conscious, syncretic process demonstrates an appreciation for the intrinsic value of creativity, growth, and change as well as for the spiritual potential of other belief systems."⁸ Africans in Cuba were not simply acting out of survival instincts. They consciously and intentionally made choices about restructuring, expanding, and elevating their many belief systems—and added those practices of their oppressors to best serve their needs. The creative, dynamic, syncretic process is not one that only occurred during the colonial-slave era; the process continuously unfolds, and practitioners adapt to ever-changing social, political, and economic environments both in Cuba and all of the places the Lucumí practice has spread. Unavoidably, the practice of the dances and sacred movements of the Orisha have also been adapted to ever-changing environments.

1.3 The Cuban Revolution, Folklorization and the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional

I traveled to Havana, Cuba, for the first time in the summer of 2015. I was on a trip organized by my Orisha dance instructor entitled “My Afro-Cuban Roots.” Over the course of ten days, we took Orisha dance classes and learned about Afro-Cuban culture.

⁷ Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World*, 2.

⁸ Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 3.

Part of our trip included a visit to the Yoruba Cultural Association and Orisha Museum in Havana, Cuba. We were there to see Obini Batá, an all-woman, Afro-Cuban folkloric performance group. Obini Batá is well known because they intentionally question through their performance the traditional assumption that only men can play *batá* drums. I watched in awe as this group of beautiful, powerful, and talented women played the drums, danced, and sang. I wondered how a place like the Yoruba Cultural Association and Orisha Museum came to be and how a group of women who seemingly go against the Lucumí tradition could be featured weekly in a place dedicated to upholding the tradition. As a reflection of Lucumí and Orisha dance adaptations, Obini Batá represents a manifestation of the ways Orisha dance has been molded by political realities. The Cuban Revolution is a political reality that has definitively shaped the performance and instruction of Orisha dance.

On December 31st, 1958, Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement overthrew Batista to become Cuba's leading political party. With socialist and communist ideologies, Fidel Castro and the Revolution began to enact significant changes to society's structure. This section introduces the cultural institutions within the Cuban Socialist State that manipulated Afro-Cuban cultural and religious practices to develop a national identity. The manipulation of Afro-Cuban dance and music forms, specifically Orisha dance forms, occurred through “folklorization.” Folklorization, according to ethnomusicologist and priestess in the Lucumí tradition, Katherine Hagedorn, is a “process in which religious practice that has been classified as a folk tradition is

reinterpreted and recontextualized as a staged and commodified folkloric performance (one that we might call secular) and yet still draws upon the communicative inspiration of its folk (read: religious) roots."⁹ For the Lucumí tradition and Orisha dance, folklorization began with selectively extracting the movements of the Orisha and the movements of practitioners in ceremony. These ceremonial movements were then codified and rearranged to form the Orisha dance technique and exaggerated for performance and instruction. Informed mainly by Hagedorn's work *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*, this section details the negotiations that occurred amongst practitioners and Revolution proponents within the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (National Folkloric Company of Cuba, CFN) to develop Afro-Cuban folkloric dance. In the scope of my research, the process of folklorization of Orisha dance indicates a defining split in Orisha dance practice. There is the studio/folkloric practice, the product of the process of folklorization. There is the ceremonial practice where Lucumí ritual and ceremonial protocols determine the practice of Orisha dance. The resounding effects of the split, facilitated by the Cuban Revolution's cultural policies are explored more deeply in Chapter 3.

In the early 1960s, after the Revolution, multiple institutions were given jurisdiction over Afro-Cuban folkloric dance development, including The National Theater of Cuba and The National Institute of Ethnography Folklore.¹⁰ Leading the

⁹ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 68.

¹⁰ Nesbitt, *To Defend the Revolution*, 42.

National Theater of Cuba, Argeliers León directed the research and performance of Afro-Cuban folkloric dance and music.

In service to the Revolution's desire to unite all Cubans under a single national identity through participation in Cuban culture, León's agenda was to "emphasize the folklife of Cuba's African-based population...to demystify the various Afro-Cuban religions and thus remedy Cuba's legendary racism."¹¹ Demystifying Afro-Cuban religions meant making aspects of the practice more visible and palatable within popular culture, and specifically more palatable and less fear-inducing to white Cubans. León set to accomplish this agenda by coupling scholarly research with education disseminated via theatrical folkloric performance. To do this, León needed to recruit informants from within the Afro-Cuban religious communities. In her work *The Footsteps of Nieves Fresneda: Cuban Folkloric Dance and Cultural Policy, 1959-1979*, Elizabeth Schwall describes how León recruited one of his first informants, Nieves Fresneda, telling her that he wanted to work with her because as a practitioner born in 1900, she had an excellent knowledge of the practices that the youths at that time did not have.¹² In an interview with León in 1990, Hagedorn shares that as leader of the National Theater of Cuba, León was concerned with authenticity in performance. He wanted the Orisha performances to be done by Lucumí practitioners, performances of Palo to be done by *Palo Mayombe*

¹¹ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 140.

¹² Schwall, *Footsteps of Nieves Fresneda*, 39-40.

practitioners, etc.¹³ Yet, according to Schwall, who quotes León's 1961 work *La danza folklórico Cubana dentro de un proceso de estudio de la misma, informe presentado a Isabel Monal y a Mirta Aguirre*, he told bureaucrats, that he planned to “expose performers and informants to the careful work of revolutionary doctrine...allow them to be brought closer to more materialistic attitudes to separate them from metaphysic situations that their beliefs implicitly carry and eventually...[break] from the religious practitioners and officiators who allow us to see their dances...so that performers of the future would not consider folklore religious.”¹⁴ Unclear to me is León's true agenda and intention, yet what is clear is that León did not get to fully realize his agenda because after jurisdiction over Afro-Cuban performance was removed from the National Theater of Cuba, León was no longer in charge of developing national Afro-Cuban folkloric performance.

The job of moving the Revolution's agenda for Afro-Cuban folkloric dance and music forward was passed on to León's former student, Rogelio Martínez Fure, and a young Mexican choreographer man named Rodolfo Reyes. In 1962, they formed the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (CFN). Though the CFN was not originally a State-sanctioned institution, within six months of its creation, the CFN was nationalized by the Cuban government. Once nationalized, the CFN became a tool used by the Cuban State to implement the folklorization of Afro-Cuban music and dance. Unlike the National

¹³ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 138-151.

¹⁴ Schwall, *Footsteps of Nieves Fresneda*, 40.

Theater of Cuba, the CFN was not governed by scholarly research of Afro-Cuban religious traditions. However, like the National Theater of Cuba, the CFN employed Afro-Cuban religious practitioners as informants. Alongside the seven informants, who, like Fresneda, were seasoned practitioners, the CFN hired fifty performers who mainly were black practitioners.¹⁵ According to Hagedorn, “joining the CFN meant not only singing and dancing, but also sitting in classrooms and seminars to listen to lectures about how the Revolution would benefit Afro-Cubans and how Afro-Cubans should cooperate with its goals by sharing their “folklore” (religions) in order to help its triumph.”¹⁶ At play within the CFN were the will of the Cuban government, the artistic and choreographic will of Fure and Reyes, and the will of the informants and performers who were expected to share their sacred practices freely. Conflict was inherent to the unaligned desires of each of these groups. It caused members and leadership of the CFN to negotiate how they would represent Afro-Cuban religious traditions. What came from the negotiations is a folkloric framework of Afro-Cuban dance and music.

According to Hagedorn, the folklorization of Afro-Cuban dance and music occurred in three ways:

- Dramatic theatrical characterizations of the movements of the Orishas
- Rearranging ritual songs
- Replacing spiritual improvisation and variation with repetition

¹⁵ Schwall, *Footsteps of Nieves Fresneda*, 40-46.

¹⁶ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 152.

Though multiple Afro-Cuban religious traditions were folklorized through this process, I focus specifically on the ways Lucumí practices and Orisha dance and music were folklorized in the CFN.

Dramatic Theatrical Characterizations of the Movement of the Orishas

In ritual ceremonies, the Orishas come into a trained initiates' body to join their devotees in celebration. During this time, the Orishas move about the room, looking for practitioners to bless and advise. Even if just walking around the room, the movements and characterizations of the Orisha are all particular manifestations of the *aché* of that Orisha. For example, *Ochún* might clean people with her skirt, fan herself, or laugh and giggle as she walks around. *Eleggúá* might skip around the room taking people's hats or sit in a rocking chair and play with children. These movements were adapted to accompany invented footwork to match the rhythms and the songs being played. This process was implemented for each Orisha, mixing the mimesis of ceremonial movement with the contrived footwork and body movement vocabulary to accentuate further and dramatize the stage's dances.

Rearranging Ritual Songs

As mentioned before, each Orisha has its corpus of songs that are sung as an offering in ritual context to celebrate, welcome, and tell the triumphs and challenges of that Orisha. As both a practitioner and a poet of the Yoruba language, Fure shared that he shortened and changed some of the Orisha songs. He claims to have stayed faithful to each Orisha's songs corpus, but within that corpus, he moved phrases of songs, deleted

stanzas of one song, and repeated other phrases and stanzas. With the help of the company informants and practitioners, the new versions of the songs were arranged alongside new versions of the rhythms played by the *batá* drums.¹⁷

Replacing Spiritual Improvisation and Variation with Repetition

Daniel states, “The ceremonial structure reveals deep knowledge of the body, emotional states and social psychology and its functioning. Dance ceremonies are carefully constructed sets of deeply engaging visual, rhythmic, sensory stimulation that results in specific emotional and physical behaviors...these rhythmic movement sequences are not random events, although they are heavily injected with improvisation.”¹⁸ The energy, life force, and *aché* used by singers, musicians, and dancers in a ceremony to read the room and gauge the intensity of spirit, and the artistic decisions that come from that assessment were traded for structure and repetition in the performance of Orisha dance. In the folkloric presentation, songs had a specific number of refrains and choruses. Musicians learned the transitions between songs, and the dancers learned the number of counts they had in each section of the dance. This standardizing method, along with continuous repetition and rehearsing, completely eliminated the improvisation, spiritual energy and essence found in the practices.¹⁹

With the established folkloric framework for Orisha dance that included dramatic theatrical characterizations of the Orishas' movements, rearranging ritual songs, and

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 121-126.

¹⁸ Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 78.

¹⁹ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 127-132.

replacing spiritual improvisation and variation with repetition, the CFN had developed a Cuban cultural commodity. This commodity was paraded around the world via multiple international tours from 1964-1971. This brought Orisha dance to stages and classrooms all over Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Afro-Cuban dance and music, specifically Orisha, became a Cuban national pride on the international stage, yet practitioners were still being mistreated and marginalized in Cuba. Diminishing an Afro-Cuban religious practice to folkloric art form situates the practice, and its practitioners within a mystical, less developed past. This process follows a colonial narrative assuring that the uncivilized past is behind the nation, and a civilized future lies ahead. It allowed the Cuban government to ignore Afro-Cuban religious practitioners' unique struggles and needs while forcing devotees to adapt to society's new socialist state's structure and vision. Because of the work of the CFN, Afro-Cuban and Orisha folkloric dance is performed and taught in a highly standardized methodology on stages and in classrooms around the world.

1.4 Orisha Dance in the United States: Transnationalism

Because of the tensions between the United States and Cuba after the Cuban Revolution, Orisha dance did not make its way to the U.S. during the CFN's international tours. However, Orisha dance arrived through other avenues. One avenue was through the bodies of Cuban migrants who held the sacred practices of Lucumí in their being and who adapted and merged their cultural practices to their new environment. As we know, the process of cultural and religious encounters and adaptation is not a new one, for it is

how the practice of Lucumí became established in Cuba. For this section, I focus on the arrival and development of Lucumí in New York and the impacts the development of Lucumí practice had on the emergence of Orisha dance in both studios and in ceremony. I chose to focus on the geographic region of New York instead of Miami, for example, where even greater numbers of Cubans migrated between 1959 and 1980 because it is the region that I have the most experience with as a student of Orisha dance and a practitioner of the Lucumí tradition. The influence of the New York Lucumí practice permeates through New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and even Washington, DC, where I am from.

According to scholar, priestess, and cultural activist Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, George Brandon, and Harry G. Lefever, the founding member of the Orisha tradition in New York was *Babalawo*, Pancho Mora, who arrived in New York in 1946 and established the first *ilé*, or house of Orisha practitioners. Moreno Vega describes how the Lucumí community between 1955-1959 included essential figures in the entertainment field, specifically in the music industry. The musicians spread knowledge about Lucumí and gained Puerto Ricans' interest in New York by integrating Orisha chants and rhythms into their performances.²⁰ The growing popularity and interest in Lucumí inspired many to travel to Cuba to become initiated. In 1962, Mercedes Noble initiated the first priestess in North America in New York, a woman named Julia Franco.²¹ Though the Lucumí

²⁰ Moreno Vega, *Yoruba Tradition to New York City*, 203.

²¹ Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World*, 106.

tradition was not strong in New York before 1959, it existed and grew, gaining devotees of Cuban, Puerto Rican, African-American, and even White Anglo-Saxon descent.

The Orisha tradition in New York expanded with two significant migrations of people from Cuba between 1959 and the 1980s. First, were the thousands of Cubans, primarily white and affluent, who left Cuba after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Harry G. Lefever notes that only some of these upper- and middle-class migrants practiced Lucumí.²² The second was the 125,000 Cubans who arrived in the Mariel boatlift in the 1980s. The Cubans who came at this time were from the working and lower classes in Cuba and brought with them well-established Lucumí beliefs and rituals.²³ Some of the migrants, especially in the Mariel boatlift, were not just Lucumí practitioners but were also trained dancers and musicians in the Afro-Cuban folkloric forms, including Orisha dance. Some of the trained dancers and musicians would make careers out of teaching Orisha dance and music to the community of Lucumí practitioners that already existed in New York and to people who did not have an interest in the practice but had an interest in learning new dance forms.

In the post-Cuban revolution and Mariel boatlift migrations, Cubans arriving in New York found community amongst Orisha practitioners. Yet, new migrant practitioners were forced to adapt their practices to their environment. The environment of the pre-existing Lucumí tradition in New York included a strong practice of Puerto

²² Lefever, *Saints Go Riding In*, 322.

²³ *Ibid*, 322.

Rican spiritism,²⁴ a shift in ritual authority, where *Olorishas* (Orisha priests) performed more ritual tasks as opposed to *Babalawos*, and adjustments in the length of time needed for initiation.²⁵ The new migrants could either adjust their own practices, which they developed throughout their lives in Cuba, to the Lucumí environment's norms in New York or recreate to the best of their ability a version of their practices that felt more authentic to what they practiced in Cuba. Elbereth M. Thornton, in her work *Transnationalism Dancing: Exploring Personal, Cultural and Community Identity in Afro-Cuban Folklore Deity Dances*, uses ethnographic research to describe the difficulties that Cuban migrants had when merging their personal and cultural identities into their new lives in the United States. Migrants expressed that they maintained their Cuban identity despite negotiating social realities such as language, food, community engagement, and dance.²⁶

Though there is an emphasis in the literature on the development of Lucumí in New York and the experiences of the Cuban migrants both within and outside the Lucumí practice, there is not much explicit dialogue about the dances of the Orisha. To draw a connection between the development of Lucumí in New York, the experiences of Cuban migrants, and the development of Orisha dance, we must acknowledge the link between embodied experiences and dance. Social, political, economic, and spiritual realities become manifest in a person's body. The realities inform the way a person carries

²⁴ Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World*, 107-111.

²⁵ Lefever, *Saints Go Riding In*, 323.

²⁶ Thornton, *Transnational Dancing*, 19, 27-30.

themselves, how they walk, talk, dress, and in the case of Orisha dance and Orisha ceremonial movement, the way they perform a ritual and the way they dance. For migrants trained as folkloric dancers and dance instructors in Cuban national companies, teaching Orisha dance in the States would require an adjustment in teaching methodology to meet non-Cuban dance students' needs. No longer would they teach and perform for people who identified Orisha dance with Cuban national identity. In the case of ritual and ceremony, migrant practitioners would probably have faced the need to adapt to the ways that ceremony unfolded in the Lucumí communities of New York. This would undoubtedly include the performance of ceremonial dance. Dance within ceremony is an integral way to engage with and invite the Orisha's spirit to join practitioners in celebration. Yet, dancing, to invite an Orisha to *mount*, or use the body of an initiate as a vessel to manifest on Earth, occurs in tandem with other ceremonial performances such as drumming and singing. Lefever describes that in the Lucumí community in New York, there were fewer instances where Orisha would *mount*, because there were not many consecrated *batá* drums which are necessary for calling down an Orisha.²⁷ With the knowledge that dancing would not produce an Orisha visitation, I imagine that Orisha ceremonial dance and movement also evolved to cope with the realities of ceremonial life. Adaptations were made to the practice and instruction of Orisha dance in studio/folkloric settings and ceremonial settings based on the present realities of those

²⁷ Lefever, *Saints Go Riding In*, 323.

who practiced Lucumí before the arrival of Cuban migrants and after the arrival of Cuban migrants.

The development of Orisha dance in New York highlights the ever-evolving nature of the religion and the dance form. The adaptations to the instruction and practice of Orisha dance in the early Cuban migrations set a precedent for how Orisha dance would be taught in New York and other cities. Later in Chapter 3 of this work, I will describe the more recent evolutions of the practice of Orisha dance in studios and ceremonies through my own ethnography.

Chapter 2: Methodologies

With a lit candle and incense burning, I sat in front of my ancestral altar with my eyes closed, meditating, open to receiving guidance about what the outward-facing production of my thesis research would be. This was not the first time I had sat at my ancestral altar seeking guidance about my thesis research, and it definitely was not the last. Yet, in May 2020, I needed to have a more concrete vision of presenting my work. After my meditation, I journaled, “Dances of the Orisha in the studio setting AND the ceremonial setting. I will teach.”

Though I did not receive the details of how I would teach, where I would teach, or who would teach me, I had a direction. Sitting at my ancestral altar was not the only way I gathered information and guidance about how to approach my thesis. My dream wisdom, conversations with my advisors, prayer and meditation, the interviews with my interlocutors, my personal movement practice, reading books on the Lucumí practice and Orisha dance, getting *divination readings* and reflecting on my own story, like the practice of sitting at my ancestral altar, were all methodologies that gave me some sort of guidance, information or substance to shape my artistic research and the development of my pedagogy.

In Chapter 1, I employ traditional scholarly methods for research, which includes an informal literature review of the work of academic scholars to create a historical scope for my project. In Chapter 3, the reader will find a combination of ethnography and auto-ethnography. I situate my own experiences amongst those of my six interlocutors and

other scholars to highlight contemporary practice of Orisha dance in the studio/folkloric setting and the ceremonial setting. The COVID 19 quarantine, social isolation and shift to at home working and learning impacted my ability to connect and follow through with a large number of interlocutors for this ethnography. I am grateful for the six interlocutors from both my religious and dance communities, whose lives and experiences I get to share in this project. Of the six, all of the interlocutors are dancers who practice or teach Orisha dance. Three are Orisha dance instructors, three are initiated into the Lucumí practice, three are women, one has Cuban heritage, five were born in the United States, five have performed Orisha dance, and I personally knew four before this research project.

I wanted to get as much variation in experience with Orisha dance as possible with such a small sample. From my interviews, I was able to identify significant themes in the practice of teaching, learning, and performing Orisha dance. Coupled with my own experiences and academic scholars' work, these resources support and expand the discussions concerning each of the relevant themes that surfaced in the interviews. Though Chapter 3 is a combination of ethnography and auto-ethnography, I move us toward my pedagogy by sharing my thoughts about the methodologies and ideologies discussed.

Using the methodologies for Orisha dance instruction and performance introduced in Chapter 3, I use Chapter 4 to share the Critical Orisha Dance Pedagogy I have curated. Chapter 4 firmly situates my work in the dance studies canon and details my emerging

beliefs about Orisha's practice within the Lucumí framework. I indicate how those beliefs become manifest as praxis in my pedagogy at the *Orisha Dance Fête*. Finally, in Chapter 5, I use feedback collected from a ten-question reflection form distributed after the event, to share the experiences of those who participated in the *Orisha Dance Fête*.

Chapter 3: Critical Ethnography of Contemporary Orisha Dance Pedagogy

3.1 Introduction

When I reflect on 2018-2020, I remember the feelings of isolation I experienced concerning my practice of Lucumí. In some ways, I was without community. It is difficult, almost impossible, to be without community in this tradition, and yet I was. In the pursuit of knowledge for this thesis, I have developed all sorts of community connections, not just community within the practice of Lucumí, but also an academic community amongst scholars that I have never met and a beautiful dance community. Also, I've found myself reaffirming community amongst dancers, practitioners and scholars I already knew. Forging these bonds and developing community through the framework of Lucumí practice during this process is one that has filled me with immense gratitude and one I seek to replicate in my own pedagogy.

In Chapter 3, I elevate many scholars' voices, putting them in conversation about significant themes that have emerged in my pursuit to understand the development of Orisha dance and Orisha dance pedagogy. For the purposes of this project, “scholars” refer to academics, practitioners, and dancers. In honoring the truth that knowledge and information within the Lucumí cultural and religious practice are passed down mainly through oral tradition and not through writing, it is important to note; I center academics, practitioners, and dancers each with equal value for the knowledge they impart. I honor

the commitment to study and scholarship required for anyone to engage with the Lucumí tradition and Orisha dance through intentional use of the word scholar.

The themes and methodologies for teaching and performing Orisha dance discussed amongst academic scholars, dance scholars, and practitioner-scholars in this chapter provide a framework that I set my Orisha dance pedagogy within. The themes outlined in Chapter 3.2 *Lucumí Conceptions of the Body and Embodiment* provide a base understanding of how I approach a dancer's physical and spiritual bodies. In Chapter 3.3, I introduce my experiences and the experiences of dancers and practitioners who attend and instruct Orisha dance classes, perform Orisha dance interpretations and engage in Orisha dance in the ceremony. The methodologies discussed in this chapter are foundational practices by which I measure, compare and develop my Orisha dance pedagogy.

3.2 *Lucumí Conceptions of the Body and Embodiment*

“You’re a vessel; remember you’re a vessel, you’re a vessel. You’re a vessel for this breath, for this energy, for *emí* or life force.” Babá Oludará has said this statement (or ones like it) to me many times throughout our four-month, intensive training in Orisha dance. This time, he used the statement “you’re a vessel” to remind me that despite my difficulty with executing the dance technique for *Ogún* in our class that morning; whenever I engage with the energy of the Orisha through movement, I am circulating and bringing forth potent life energy for myself and others. Most dictionaries define a vessel as an empty container, but I have always been sure that Babá Olu was not simply calling

me a flesh form of glass Tupperware. He was speaking to some intangible, or perhaps spiritual, quality of the human body to hold and transmit things.

So far, I have described Lucumí as a cultural and religious practice and have touched little on its inherent spirituality. I define spirituality as conscious engagement with other realities through the awareness of mind-body-soul connections. The mind-body-soul connection, for me, is the convergence of material, the physical body and non-material entities and energies within an individual. And spirituality denotes the conscious and intentional engagement with the possibilities and realities birthed from the mind-body-soul connection. Exploring the mind-body-soul connection within the Lucumí practice demands an understanding the potentials of the human body.

Some scholars would agree that there is a convergence of material and non-material entities and energies within the body. For example, J. Lorand Matory states “Even the most rudimentary unit of society, the living human, is constituted by the incorporation of the structurally foreign. The *emí* or life-breath and the ancestral soul is foreign to that living human, but injected into the human’s head, it becomes central and essential to an active and socially connected person.”²⁹ In this sense, Matory speaks to the foreign or non-material entities, such as life-breath from God, or an ancestral presence that converge with the material aspects of a human to make a person. Beliso de Jesús calls the convergence of material and non-material entities and energies *co-presences*, “which are the Orisha (divinities), various spirits, and familial ancestors [that] are

²⁹ Matory, *Vessels of Power*, 108.

recognized as being on, around, and within practitioners' bodies [that] are sensed and felt on the body.”³⁰

Scholars of Afro-Cuban religion and folkloric dance agree that within Lucumí, the understanding of co-presences is distinctly different from the normative approaches of Western science, medicine, and spirituality. Yvonne Daniel highlights the difference between Western approaches and Lucumí approaches to the body by saying,

The ritual communities I have studied encourage the utility of both cognitive—theoretical and kinesthetic—embodied pieces of knowledge. Because they do not subscribe to European and American mind/body dualism. They do not reject science and theoretical knowledge for experiential knowledge. Rather, they incorporate all sorts of knowledge within bodily and ritual practice.³¹

Mind/body dualism describes the Western idea that the mind is the seat of knowledge and awareness in the human experience. The body is simply a tool of the mind, a means to an end, a useless, lifeless collection of bones and sinew.

Though there may not be a belief in mind/body dualism in the Lucumí practice, there are distinctions about one's ability to intentionally engage with and manipulate the multiple convergences of their personhood. This distinction is usually based on whether or not a person is initiated into the practice, and to what extent they are initiated. In Lucumí, there are several initiations that one goes through to formalize their relationship with and commitment to the Orisha. Each of these initiations involves altering the body in some form or fashion, either on the actual body through marks and lacerations— “the

³⁰ Beliso de Jesús, *Santería Copresence*, 9.

³¹ Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 57.

aché (power to accomplish; essence; herbal medicines) of the Orisha literally resides inside the initiate's head;"³²—or kinesthetically, through new patterns of body use. "The creation of these new bodily patterns in the *Guerreros initiation ritual* presents an interesting case: the signs used in the ritual have meaning that can be communicated verbally, but here the signs are experientially apprehended through the body; they are not simply understood but also enacted. As he uses his body in new ways, his subjectivity is transformed."³³ The initiations in Lucumí facilitate a dramatic shift in a practitioner's physical body and a profound re-orientation of their relationship with their co-presences. The re-orientation situates the initiate more deeply within the practice of Lucumí, which has effects on the initiate's entire life. Therefore, it is not difficult to see why scholars might focus their studies on the ways that initiated people engage with the otherwise possibilities and realities that they are introduced to via the initiation process.

A combination of the physical and kinesthetic re-orientation that occurs through initiation is expressed in *mounting*. Scholars tend to highlight *mounting* as process by which a dancing priest/priestess offers their body as a vessel for the Orisha's presence. Yvonne Daniel refers to the process as a transformation of a person into a superhuman,

A superhuman body is the result of spiritual transformation. When the worshipping, believing, and dancing human body is prepared for or overwhelmed by spiritual force's arrival, the dancing body proceeds to unfold spiritual energy, or present or manifest divinities.³⁴

³² Mason, *Living Santería*, 8-9.

³³ *Ibid*, 46.

³⁴ Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 61.

In ritual and ceremony, *mounting* is facilitated by singing and drumming, along with dancing. The combination of the three, along with a priest/priestess' willingness to be a vessel is essential to welcoming the Orisha to be present. Iyá Michele Stafford was raised in the Lucumí tradition in Brooklyn, NY, and has been a Priestess of *Yemayá* since she was four years old. She passionately shared with me that Lucumí is her way of life, not simply her religion. The dancing priest/priestess, according to Iyá Michele, "serves as a conduit for allowing the Orishas, one, to join the earth, to provide messages and ultimately to just see the joy on their faces." This experience of joy when the Orisha, a high form of divinity, enters a human body is why some practitioners consider *mounting* the ultimate embodied experience that an initiated person can have.

In our interview, Babá Tony shared his understanding of *mounting* as the ultimate embodiment of the Orisha within the Lucumí practice by saying, "to embody you have to give your body." Giving your body, preparing it, and making it available for use by the Orisha is not just for the dancing priest/priestess, but also the community. In this tradition, the participation of individuals in the community ensures that the tradition continues, and also at the level of ceremony, ensures the success of the ceremony. Though various Orisha may mount a single priest/priestess or multiple priests/priestesses, the community's energy facilitates the Orisha's arrival. Once the Orisha arrives, the community tends to the Orisha by offering them their favorite things. The Orisha then proceeds to reciprocate offerings back to the community by cleansing and giving advice and blessings to the participants.

Roberto Strongman in his work *Queering Black Atlantic Religions* even suggests that this level of embodiment is so powerful that a priest/priestess, regardless of gender, can be *mounted* by an Orisha no matter the Orisha's gender. "This unique view of the body in which ego, soul or anima exists in an outward orientation vis-à-vis the physical body...allows the re-gendering of the bodies of initiates, which are mounted and ridden by deities of a gender different from their own during the ritual ecstasy of trance possession."³⁵ At this level, again, it is not just about the priest/priestess whose body is being shared with the Orisha but is about the needs of the community. If a particular Orisha's energy is being welcomed by the community, then the Orisha will make their way to celebrate and share within that community. But this divine experience is available only to initiates who have undergone the *crowning initiation*, making them a priest/priestess.

What happens to initiates who are not priests/priestesses? Or those who are not initiated at all? What does embodied engagement with the Orisha look like for them? Though scholars often privilege the experience of the initiated person within the practice of Lucumí, this does not mean initiates who are not a priest/priestess or uninitiated people have no potential for engaging their co-presences and the Orisha. In fact, some dancers and practitioner-scholars discuss the ways initiates who are not priests/priestesses and uninitiated people engage co-presences and build their awareness and connection to the Orisha. In his work, *Breathing With Orisha*, Babá Oludará states, "It is important for

³⁵ Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, 3.

Black, African descendant, and Indigenous peoples to learn and practice African traditional wellness methods like *Breathing With Orisha* as a form of care and resilience.”³⁶ Babá Oludaré has developed a way for initiates who are not priests/priestesses and uninitiated people to engage with their own bodies, co-presences and the Orisha within the sacred practice of Lucumí. He does this by teaching the reader/participant basic concepts and beliefs that are rooted in the cosmology of Lucumí practice:

Your body carries the corporal files of your lived existence from the birth of creation until now...Our blood is made inside the bone where the marrow lives. The marrow and brain are made of the same substances. The blood, the brain, and the nervous system that stems from the brain are connected physiologically and store the records of life within each and every one of us. In our marrow—which in extension means the brain, blood, nervous system, and essentially the whole body—lives the memories, experiences, traumas, and victories of all ancestors who came before us...The Yoruba believe that Olódumare, the creator, is our ultimate ancestor. Breathing deeply through the body provides access to the underlying ancestral experiences that address your personal and present-day obstacles.³⁷

Initiates who are not priests/priestesses and uninitiated people can engage their co-presences and the Orisha through the simple act of breathing. They can also engage their co-presences and the Orisha through Orisha dance. Jonathan Burke is an *aborisha* in the Lucumí practice who started studying Orisha dance because of his exposure to other popular Cuban dance forms. He has been studying Orisha dance for seven years and is

³⁶ Bernard, *Breathing With Orisha*, 103.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 53.

both a performer and instructor of Orisha dance. He speaks about the accessibility of

Orisha dance:

Giving respect to the hierarchy [of priest/priestess, initiated and uninitiated] dance is the most accessible feature of the religion. It's a way for new people starting up in the religion to find a connection to it, even if they don't know how to dance. Even if they know just one or two steps, I think anybody can learn dance without being a specialist and without extensive training. Why is that important? Because it gives even the person with the least experience a way to speak or connect directly to Orishas.³⁸

Initiates who are not priests/priestesses and uninitiated people who study Orisha dance either in the ceremonial setting or studio/folkloric classes can engage their co-presences and the Orisha's energy through their bodies using movement.

Toward the development of a critical Orisha dance pedagogy, I agree with the basic Lucumí principle that the body is the site of converging co-presences and energies. However, my work does not focus solely on the potential or capacity of a priest/priestess to engage their co-presences and the energy of the Orisha. My pedagogy is founded upon my belief that within the practice of Lucumí, any person has the potential to become aware of and engage with their co-presences and the Orisha. Later in Chapter 4, I will illustrate how this belief manifests in how I choose to teach Orisha dance.

3.3 Contemporary Forms of Orisha Dance Pedagogy

The DC Casineros Dance Company performance depicted in this video features a song called “Despójate con *Elegguá* or Strip Yourself (a reference to spiritual cleansing)

³⁸ Jonathan Burke, In discussion with author, November 2020.

with *Elegguá*.”³⁹ Though the song is a *Timba* (Cuban salsa music) song, its lyrics speak about *Elegguá*, and includes some of the prayers for *Elegguá* in Yoruba and admonishes the listener to “límpiate con fé,” or “*cleanse yourself with faith.*” The choreography matches the music's theme by including *Casino* (Cuban salsa dance) and Orisha dance, specifically the movements of *Elegguá*. Dancers both use the *garabato* (stick in the shape of a 7 and tool of *Elegguá* to open and close the roads) and characterizations of *Elegguá* to interpret the music. At the end of the video, an Orisha dance teacher leads the group in *Elegguá* Orisha dance movements.

I was first introduced to Orisha dance about eleven years ago when I first started dancing and performing *Casino* dance. I am but one of many students who learn about Orisha dance through the practice of another Cuban dance form. In the United States, many enter Afro-Cuban and Orisha folkloric dance classes because of *Casino* dance, U.S. salsa dance, or even bachata. *Casino* dance is one of the more accessible Cuban dance forms because of its more secular origins and because of its resemblance to U.S. salsa dance. *Casino* is a Cuban popular partner dance from the 1950s that has origins in the Cuban genres of *Son* and *Danzón*. Though *Casino* dance's origins cite European ballroom dance forms as one of its main contributors, it includes African rhythmic and movement aesthetics. In more recent years, *Casino* dance has expanded to include the Orishas'

³⁹ DC Casineros, “Rueda de *Casino*, and Afro-Cuban audience participation,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Y7clkgvB5M&list=PLmgm5RZU29e-icaqgvzIaXqQDb-eBv_3v&index=53

dances as a way to add more flavor and complexity to Casino dancing, yet, for those unfamiliar with Lucumí practice, doing Orisha dances in Casino dance can be a disconnected experience. In my own journey, I was intrigued by the dances of the Orishas I learned in Casino dance class and wanted to learn more. So, a few years after my initial exposure to dancing and performing Casino, I took my first Afro-Cuban folkloric dance class focused on the Orisha. Since that first class, I have taken many Orisha dance classes with numerous instructors in Cuba, Washington, DC, New York, London, Los Angeles, and other cities, often visiting dance festivals as both a participant and performer of Orisha dance interpretations.

This section details the ways Orisha dance is taught, learned, and performed in the contemporary studio/folkloric context and the ceremonial context. This section draws on my personal experiences and the experiences and voices of interlocutors to demonstrate the complexities involved in teaching, learning, and performing Orisha dance and the negotiations dancers and practitioners undergo in disseminating dances of the Orishas. I begin this section by introducing common teaching methodologies for learning and performing Orisha dance in the studio/ folkloric and ceremonial contexts. Though I start by placing them on opposing sides, it will become clear how the two have a symbiotic relationship negotiated at the individual body level. Finally, I will discuss how my personal negotiations within the studio/ folkloric context and the ceremonial context have led to specific choice-making in developing my own critical orisha dance pedagogy.

3.3.1 Studio/Folkloric Context

“El TORSO, el TORSO! (*The CHEST, the CHEST!*)” yelled passionately over live drumming, is a reminder from my instructor to emphasize the chest movements more as I dance across the floor.

“What more do they want from me!?” I often think when being reminded like this. Typically, I am already bending my knees, leaning forward, holding syncopated rhythm in my feet, my head, and my arms, and sometimes even singing at the same time! Focusing more on the chest always leads me to forget to emphasize another part of the body, which then triggers the instructor, “El *MOLLEYO*, el, *MOLLEYO!* (*The PULSE, the PULSE!*)” Every aspect of the movement is essential. And they all must be emphasized in perfect harmony with the music in Orisha dance technique.

Within the studio/folkloric setting of Orisha dance practice, there are a few structures that must be highlighted as they affect the content and delivery of classes. First, consider the Western dance studio and dance culture itself. Unless one can purchase or rent their own studio space for teaching, in the United States, it is necessary to develop a partnership with a dance studio offering adult classes.

If an instructor does not already know someone at the organization, if they do not speak English, and if they do not already have prospective students, they may face difficulties in even setting up a regularly scheduled class offering. In many cities, these barriers make it challenging to find an Afro-Cuban dance class that runs consistently over time.

Relatedly, there is often a diverse group of students and student motivations in Orisha dance classes. In all of the classes I have taken, I have witnessed students of different ages and generations, ethnicities and races; varying dance training experience, levels of initiation within the Lucumí practices, as well as practitioners of varying Orisha-based traditions or non-Orisha-based African traditional religions show up to take Orisha dance class. It is hard to project specific motivations on any given student. Yet, common motivations range from cultural curiosity to wanting exercise, to using dance to further study within their own religious practice.

Next, consider the studios themselves. These studios tend to be square or rectangular-shaped rooms; they only permit certain types of shoes; they have specialized flooring; they have at least one wall of mirrors, and they usually do not allow food or drink other than water. These norms affect how an instructor can choreograph bodies in the studio, how they can introduce live musicians, and to what extent they can manifest non-western values of the body and experience of Orisha dancing in their classes.

Though the structures of the studios, dance studio culture, and the diversity of students in these classes can limit how instructors format their classes, they can still make impactful pedagogical decisions that curate a dancer's experience of the Orisha or other co-presences in Orisha dance classes.

Instructors' backgrounds also inform the pedagogical decisions that are made in Orisha dance instruction. As previously noted, my first exposure to Orisha dance was within Casino dance classes. My instructors, like me, were not Cuban, but also like me,

had trained under Master Teachers from Cuba. Otherwise, I have only taken Orisha dance classes from Cubans; most of them, no matter what city or part of the world I have been in, have been Cuban-born and trained. They have been professionally trained either in the Cuban National School of the Arts or some other professional company run by those who were trained in Cuba's national dance academies. This is not to say that there are not non-Cuban professionally trained individuals who teach Orisha dance, but in my experience, the vast majority are Cuban. This phenomenon is partly because of the Cuban Revolution's cultural policies that facilitated the standardization of folkloric teaching methodologies and Cuban migration to the U.S. In Cuba, instructors spend years training the Orisha dances to *batá* drums and rhythms played for the Orisha using other instruments. Many Cuban-born and trained instructors have expressed sentiments that reflect a post I saw on Instagram from a well-known Cuban instructor:

I have been observing the lack of respect for my country's culture for a long time, specifically for African descendants' folklore. Now I see that the world is full of schools where my country's folklore is being taught by less than trained and experienced "teachers." This short and incomplete teaching results in graduates being certified as "professors" of Cuban folklore. I think it is time to clarify that to train a professor in my country requires the following training for 3 to 5 years, depending on the study level. Ladies and gentlemen, respect yourselves and the Cuban culture. That a teacher does not train in a week or a month.⁴⁰

The post then goes on to list 11 subject areas of training in dance and music with sub-categories listed under each numbered subject. It is not unrelated then that the many

⁴⁰ Blanco, Instagram, January 26, 2021.

Cuban-born and trained instructors I have learned from, teach with similar methodologies and practices.

The following section discusses seven major methodologies and practices that my interlocutors and I have observed as students or have done as instructors in studio/folkloric Orisha dance classes. Most of these methodologies are reflections of and direct responses to the methodologies used by Cuban born and trained instructors. I hold that our experiences vary and sometimes contradict each other. This section is simply meant to expose and discuss the range of subjectivities and experiences in studio/folkloric Orisha dance classes.

Musicality

Orisha dance is accompanied by Orisha music. Some classes are privileged to have live drumming, and some are not. An extensive amount of Orisha music was recorded by groups in Cuba, such as Abbilona, Yoruba Andabo, Lázaro Ros, and Mercedita Valdés. All are available on the internet, therefore, there is always music that can be used for the classes that do not have live *batá* drumming.

In the classes with live drumming especially, instructors take the care and time to deconstruct and scaffold the music for students. *Batá* ensembles include three drums playing complementary rhythms. Depending on the Orisha and the selected rhythm for that lesson, the instructor will highlight which beats and counts are most important to emphasize in the dance. Jennifer Zurek is a dancer who learned about Orisha dance

through Casino dance. She has been studying Orisha dance for five years. She expresses the benefit she received from such strategies,

What I really appreciated about her [the instructor], especially in the early days, was her real focus on the music and connecting to the drums. It could be something as simple as, you're supposed to enter the music at a certain point. She would clap with the pattern for the drum that you're supposed to enter in on to help you connect with what you're supposed to be hearing in the drums.⁴¹

Understanding the musicality can make or break a dancer's experience in Orisha dance.

For Jonathan Burke, "Exploring the music is one of the things that for me was most helpful and made me feel like I was on a good path." Later in our conversation, he shared that as an instructor, he emphasizes musicality because of the ways that exploring the music helped him learn.

Songs

Unlike musicality, singing Orisha's songs is not always a given in studio/folkloric Orisha dance classes. In my experience, introducing the songs can take up a significant portion of class time, and asking dancers to sing while dancing can sometimes be overwhelming to the dancers. I have experienced instructors who wait until the second or third class in a series for a particular Orisha to introduce songs. Also, it is most beneficial to teach songs when there is live drumming so that the drummers can assist by playing the same part of the rhythm repeatedly allowing dancers to repeatedly sing the same refrain. So, for classes without live musicians there is usually no singing.

⁴¹ Jennifer Zurek, In discussion with author, December 2020.

In her experience, Jennifer has learned from an instructor who always makes his class sing. Although she was resistant to singing at first, she shared,

It blew my mind after learning all the songs basically just through osmosis. It really makes a huge difference as a learner and like in your experience of the class. I felt like what he was asking me to learn, songs in this, Yoruba or Creole Yoruba, I'm like, this is impossible. I've always been a book learner, you know, so to never even see something written out. I have never, ever learned anything through oral tradition. And then I was like, "Oh, well, now I, I see how oral tradition works," like in practice.⁴²

Later in our conversation, Jennifer mentioned how she continues to be amazed at what her body has absorbed and how learning the songs in class via the oral tradition has changed her understanding of herself as a learner.

Yesterday was, *el Día de San Lázaro* (the day of *Saint Lazarus*). And so, I got in the mood, right? I'm gonna listen to some songs. If you ask me, off the top of my head, oh, name a song for *San Lázaro*, that's not an Orisha that I practice frequently. But then I put on this track, and then it all comes kind of flooding back, you know, and it's weird because you don't notice your brain changing in that way. And then yeah, it gets inside.⁴³

Jennifer experienced what practitioners experience in ceremony, embodied learning through participation. Though she did not remember with her mind, at the level of the body, she received and remembered more than she realized.

Orisha Dance Technique

I asked all of my interlocutors if they thought that there was an Orisha dance technique. Three out of the six responded by naming basic body positions and movements that they have learned or observed in their practice of Orisha dance. Such

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

positions and movements include keeping bent knees or hinging forward, consistent use of the chest, relaxed shoulders, and the *molleyo*, which can be described as a bouncing pulsation coming from the knees and reverberating throughout the body. The three who responded almost immediately to the question of technique with body positions and movements all started learning Orisha dance through a studio/folkloric context. This fact highlights the emphasis on technique and training of the body in this context.

Though he did not name body positions and movements when I asked about the existence of the Orisha dance technique, Babá Tony said that as an instructor, he tells his students to focus on their feet. He acknowledges that incorporating the hands and arms along with the movements of the torso and upper body can be overwhelming for students, so he encourages them to get the timing of the feet first: “get that groove and stay on that groove.”

Notions of characterization and facial expressions also came up in this conversation. Rebecca (Bex) Hernández, who has Cuban heritage, has been studying Orisha dance for seven years and was exposed to Orisha dance through Casino dance. When addressing the question of technique, she spoke about learning facial expressions and the nuance of different Orisha's characterizations. She uses the Orisha *Oyá* as an example: “When I was learning *Oyá*, I had to focus on keeping my eyes wide open, my eyebrows raised and puffing up my cheeks and face because I learned that that was part of her characterization.”

Attire and Props

Attire and props are elements that show up in some classes and not others. When I say attire, I refer specifically to folkloric skirts used for dancing for female Orisha. In general, instructors do not require students to wear skirts when dancing for a female Orisha in class. Sometimes it is difficult to know ahead of time which Orisha will be the class's subject on a given day unless the class runs consistently, or the information is stated explicitly on a flyer or brochure. Students who are familiar with Orisha dance often bring a folkloric skirt to class just in case. Many instructors I have taken a class with, regardless of their respective gender, will teach female Orisha dances with a skirt.

Props, on the other hand, are very rare in Orisha dance classes. They are rare not because they are not referenced as part of the movement but because they are usually ceremonial or ritual objects and/or the instructor does not have enough non-consecrated versions of those objects to use in class. I have only taken one class where an instructor brought in props for us to use. This class ran in a series. In this particular series, we learned the dances of *Elegguá*, and the instructor had multiple dressed *garabatos* that we passed around throughout the class.

History and Context

Teaching and learning the history and context of Lucumí and Orisha dance are topics that each of my interlocutors and I discussed. Simply put, Iyá Michele says, “you got to know where it's coming from, and the why behind it.” In the studio/folkloric setting, instructors interpret and practice this statement to varying degrees. From my own

experiences and discussions with interlocutors, the history and context of Lucumí and Orisha dance is always something that students want more of from their classes. Yet, instructors, especially those who are practitioners, are often very careful about sharing.

The shared information seems to always focus solely on the Orisha, either through direct description or through stories. In my experience, the very least, and sometimes the most, an instructor will share are the aspects of nature an Orisha represents as a way to connect the students to the Orisha. For example, in a class where I was learning the dances of *Yemayá*, I was told that *Yemayá* is the great mother of everyone, that the ocean and the color blue represent her, and while dancing, I should think about the movements of water in the ocean and being a proud and strong mother as a way to inform my movement. That was the only information that I got about *Yemayá* in that class.

Very rarely, instructors mention the religious practice that the Orisha come from or any particular aspects of the practice. The shared stories are often referred to as folktales and not as stories from the sacred text: the *Odu Ifá*. Jennifer recognizes the potential difficulties that an instructor might face if they were to share more of the religious context,

A lot of folklore teachers will implore stories to teach about characterization. It kind of depends on each teacher. So, I think those kinds of stories about the Orishas are important. But I believe that many teachers, probably for various reasons, limit the kind of information they share about the religion in class. I remember one class I went to where there was a drop-in student, and I think she said she was French, but she dated a guy from Haiti. She's in this Afro-Cuban dance class, just kind of going through the paces. And then, at one point, the instructor took a break. And he said, "Okay, so now you've learned the steps. And now, the ultimate goal is elevation because the idea is, you're supposed to be possessed by the Orisha and go into a trance." He explained this, and then the

drop-in student basically goes, "Wait, so this is like, some Voodoo stuff?" And everybody was like, "Oh, my God." Anyways, the whole situation was explained with grace. Still, it was the kind of thing that dawned on me, that a person could, you know, it didn't have to be a drop-in student, it could be a pretty casual student of Afro-Cuban dance, that could not realize you're embodying an Orisha in this dance, and that's what you're trying to represent in a performance this— this phenomenon. There are probably many casual students who don't get that because maybe the teachers aren't going into fundamentally what happens? Perhaps, not to scare people away? I don't know how people would handle it.⁴⁴

Yet, if instructors do use stories, the way they detail the stories and connect them to the class's movement is critical to students' ability to embody the movements. Bex shares:

What's most helpful to me to really connect to the Orisha is understanding the stories behind it. And not really being consumed with trying to become that Orisha, because I feel like through the dances, you're trying to portray that character or the deity in a certain way. But to make sure that you're not doing it superficially. How everything's connected and how it's connected spiritually, not just from this characterization type watered-down version, but where it truly came from, the spiritual aspect of it, because at the end of the day, that's what it is.⁴⁵

In this context, doing the movement "superficially" means that one is simply repeating steps without any grounding in understanding the Orisha that they are dancing for, or the tradition it comes from.

Not having direct instruction via stories or characterizations can lead to students referencing their own understanding and experiences to inform the movement. William (Willie) Sánchez, who is from El Salvador has been studying Orisha dance for seven years and was first exposed to Orisha dance via Casino dance. He shares:

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Rebecca Hernández, In discussion with author, January 2021.

When it comes to learning, for me, I do how you [the instructor] do it. But I also add my insight, my movement to it. In Casino choreography, we only have focused on, “This is the move for *Ogún*, and this is a move for, you know, *Yemayá*, *Obatalá*,” very specific to what we need to learn to perform. So, when I learned, I’ve focused pretty much on how they [the instructors] move their body and how it relates to the dance. However, I’m also a little bit lost on the whole perspective because I only watch and look at it. So, when it comes to the background, I don’t think I have learned a lot.⁴⁶

In Casino dance classes and parties, it is not uncommon to see the dances of the Orishas. In these environments, Orisha dance is extracted to fit the counts for Casino, which are different from the counts for Orisha dance. The movements are often named after the Orisha and are taught with minimal reference to the meaning and characterization of that Orisha. If a student finds interest in the movements of the Orisha, they have to take the initiative to seek out Orisha dance classes or do research on the Orishas on their own. In movement forms, dancers need to find their own style within the dance, but it is also important for dancers to understand what they are doing and why; so, they can find that freedom within the form.

Individual practice

In the studio/folkloric context, Orisha dance is frequently introduced as an individual practice. Students are responsible for listening and copying the instructor and must exercise the agency to ask questions if they need support. Students can look to other students in the classroom to mimic their movements, but it is encouraged to focus on the instructor. Some instructors, however, intentionally create communal energy by using

⁴⁶ William Sánchez, In discussion with author, February 2021.

circular formations in class, encouraging students to sing together or clap with the rhythm while other students are going across the floor.

Students who wish to learn more will take private lessons with an instructor. In a private lesson, students pay for one-on-one sessions with the instructor to receive pointed guidance and feedback in their movement practice and so they may learn more about the history and context of the dances. Both Bex and Jennifer shared how their private lessons helped them to deepen their study of Orisha dance. They shared that private lessons helped them embody the Orisha's energy better than in group classes in studios. In the same theme, Willie shared that he has only learned Orisha dance in group classes and it has limited his ability to learn more in-depth information about the Orisha and the Lucumí tradition.

Orisha dance in studio/folkloric settings is introduced as an individual practice, and yet, with limited information students are discouraged from using their own experiences and understandings to inform their movements. However, both Bex and Willie spoke about connecting to their ancestors during Orisha dance classes and using that spiritual energy to help them engage the movements of the Orisha. Willie shared:

When I dance to the Orisha, my grandmother who raised me comes to my mind, to be honest with you. The reason why she comes to my mind is that *ella era una rezadora*. How do you say that in English? She was a praying woman. And in my hometown, she was well-known because she would pray. When there was somebody that would die, the first person that they'd call was her. And she would go ahead and pray and do *El Novenario*. That's nine days that we celebrate. She will know every single thing on how to pray. So, when I do these types of dances, especially *Obatalá* and for Orishas in general, in my mind, I think of my grandma. *Es como un saludo*, like a salute, saluting her. When I dance to Orishas,

even when I see people dancing to Orishas, it comes to my mind, like, like there's a spirit going on. There's something moving, you know.⁴⁷

Instructors do not always account for individual's co-presences and lived experiences in their classes. Instructors anticipate students who sign up for Orisha dance classes to want to engage with the Orisha, so they facilitate a class that nurtures the exclusive connection to the Orisha's energy through music and dance. Yet, an individual's co-presences can be powerful vehicles to help students connect with the Orisha.

The Instructor

Both the instructors and dancers I spoke to all mentioned instructors that they had learned from and some of the benefits and challenges presented by their instructors' choices in teaching. Babá Tony shared:

When I took classes, I noticed their [the instructors'] teaching methods. I don't knock anybody's methods; everybody's methods are the way that they are. But I noticed that when I took a class, they all do the same thing. They would go straight on. They would say, this is what you do. [mimics drums] *Rakata rakata raka*. Without an explanation or a breakdown. Basically, for those who can dance, it was easy, but for those who didn't dance, they just couldn't get it the same way. For example, they picked one Orisha; then, they would have the drummers sing a song. They may follow that by having students sing a song that goes with that rhythm. And they'd say, "Let's get it done; this is what it looks like. The step is [claps the steps]. Now you move." And then, as you started dancing, they would correct you as you go. Now, I don't find that to be bad. I simply had to find my way or method; I had to find a method to make sure that the people who took my classes came back because I noticed that students wouldn't come back often when I took these people's classes.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Babá Tony "Yemayá" Domenech, In discussion with author, December 2020.

Because of his experiences with Orisha dance instructors, Babá Tony made conscious decisions about how he would teach his students.

Bex also spoke about an instructor's personality and how his or her respect towards the dances and the students helps her connect with the movement. “When somebody's teaching something, it's important for me that they're coming from a place of humility and sincerity. That it's not coming from a place of like being arrogant or appropriating the dances...Anybody can teach any type of dance. So, I think someone's energy in even the way they're teaching the material is important.”

Similarly, Jennifer and Willie spoke about having trusted relationships with their instructors that allowed them to ask questions about the movement, characterization, and, in some cases, the religious practice from which the dances come. They found that instructors that were open to questions supported their own deeper study of Orisha dance.

Though some instructors choose to exclude some methodologies, I believe that musicality, song, appropriate attire, Orisha dance technique and ceremonial movement, and the history and context of Lucumí are all critical for a fully engaged and embodied experience of Orisha dance. The history and context of Lucumí practice must be included in Orisha dance classes because there is no Orisha without Lucumí practice. Music, song, and proper attire all contribute to a person's ability to learn not just with their minds but to learn and receive with their bodies, which helps the process of embodiment. Though the connection between the listed methodologies and ceremony may not be evident yet,

the next section, which discusses Orisha dance in the ceremonial context, will further draw the connections.

3.3.2 Ceremonial Context

I stood in the living room of a house in Camden, New Jersey, on an October day in 2018. All the furniture had been removed, leaving an open space. There were three drummers and a singer standing in one corner of the room. There were many guests in this home because an *aborisha* was starting her one-year journey to being crowned a priestess of *Obatalá*. As the drums began in the living room, the guests gathered, and soon, the singing and dancing began. One of the people I attended the event with pushed me forward, “Why don’t you dance. Don’t you know these dances?” I was terrified. Yes, at that point, I had already spent many years learning the dances of the Orisha, but, at that moment, I did not feel qualified to dance. This was not the studio; I didn’t know when to dance. And I did not want to just jump in the front and start dancing without being sure.

I first initiated into the Lucumí practice in Cuba in 2015 by receiving my *warriors*. I had developed a close relationship with one of my instructors and traveled with them to Havana, Cuba. This was not my first trip to Cuba, but it was my first time with a group led by an instructor who was Cuban from outside of Havana and was a priestess in the Lucumí practice. Since then, I have attended numerous ceremonies in Cuba, Washington, DC, and London. I must honor and acknowledge that I am but an *aborisha*, one who has received multiple levels of initiation in the Lucumí tradition but has not completed the *crowning initiation* as a priestess of my governing Orisha. This

means that I am not privy to some of the sacred rituals and procedures that occur in the ceremony. For this reason, in this section, I speak directly to how Orisha dance and Orisha ceremonial movement is learned and taught within the ceremonial setting, both from my own experience and from some additional perspectives provided by practitioner, and academic scholars.

The practice and ritual protocol of Lucumí governs how Orisha dance is taught in the ceremonial setting. Though I cannot outline the rituals and protocols of the ceremony, Michael Atwood Mason helps by describing the nature of the learning environment in a ceremony, “In Santería, the teaching of ritual skills and moral behavior happens informally and non-verbally, and thus embodiment is important. Because learning centers on practice and entering actively into this tradition, this learning takes place slowly.”⁴⁹ What this means is that elders and experienced practitioners do the “teaching”, and younger (in terms of years initiated) practitioners and other attendees learn Orisha dance and Orisha ceremonial movement through watching and participating. I include the term Orisha ceremonial movement as distinct from Orisha dance to acknowledge that, in ceremony, there are many movements associated with engaging the energy of the Orisha that is not considered dance technique in the way that one might learn them in the studio/folkloric setting. Yet, these movements, which include the use of sacred objects, are equally integral to engagement with the Orisha. In Lucumí practice, tools and objects

⁴⁹ Mason, *Living Santeria*, 31.

are used to represent the Orisha's relationships to their earthly manifestations. Therefore, they are used on practitioners' altars and *thrones* and in the dances to further represent the Orisha. For example, *Ogún* is the Orisha that lives in the forest and personifies disciplined work. In his work in the forest, he uses a machete. Practitioners often keep a machete on their altars for him and dancers use the machete as the main prop for dancing.

Collective Practice

Approaching Orisha dance in ceremony requires an understanding of the collective nature of the practice. Dancing for the Orisha is part of a living experience during the ceremony. Ceremonial dance is facilitated not only by the individual dancer but also by all of the work, prayers, songs, music, offerings, and intentions set for space by those who are responsible for setting up and participating in the ceremony.

Jonathan speaks about the network of collective energy, specifically the network of dancing, singing, and drumming that supports ceremonial dancing.

It's like a web. One thing speaks to the other. The song can speak to the dance, the dance can speak to the drums, the drum can speak to the dance, the song can speak back and every other dimension. It's like no one has more control over the other. And it's also about coming together as a community, not focusing on how you look, but on how you can all make each other feel. And then how you all can elevate the atmosphere.⁵⁰

This means that participants are learning not only Orisha dance but also rhythm and song while also observing, embodying and performing the symbiotic relationship between the three. The collective energy of all participants helps to move the spirit of the Orisha.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Burke, In discussion with author, November 2020.

Dance and Movement

Iyá Michele shared her experiences learning Orisha dance in ceremony,

My first learning experiences are probably non-traditional, right, in the sense of not being in a classroom. As a priestess of *Yemayá*, and this being my culture, I would say I learned in our traditional ceremonies, our *bembes*, our drumming. As you're learning the culture, the religion, you're learning about the Orisha. And then it gets reinforced at drummings, and you're just watching other people, your elders, and you're mimicking their movements. And then I could maybe say it was reinforced in dance class [studio class].⁵¹

Practitioners mimicking Orisha movements are observing the embodied energies and representations of the Orisha in real-time. A practitioner might observe a priest or priestess of the *Yemayá* waving their skirt or arms like waves of the ocean. They might observe a priest/priestess of the Orisha *Shangó* lifting their arms diagonally and pulling their arms down towards their crotch as if they are grabbing lightning from the sky. They might also observe practitioners simply swaying and stepping from side to side. These are all considered Orisha dance.

In a ceremony, dancing and executing specific movements with the body can be considered a ritual skill. Practitioners who are aware of the protocols demonstrate their ritual skill by stepping forward to dance at appropriate times. Along with the dancers' ritual knowledge, a practitioner learns other bodily movements essential for respectfully engaging with and embodying the Orisha's energy. A practitioner will learn how to prostrate in front of the drums or in front of the Orisha's thrones. For male Orisha, this

⁵¹ Iyá Michele Stafford, In discussion with author, December 2020.

involves lying flat on one's stomach until a priest or priestess of that particular Orisha touches their back and lifts them; they then cross their arms and touch their right shoulders then left shoulders before hugging. For a female Orisha, prostration involves laying on one's left side with their right hand on their hip, then switching to laying on their right side with their left hand on their hip until a priest or priestess of the Orisha lifts them up, crosses their arms and touches right shoulders then left shoulders before hugging. These prostrations are also considered dances or movements of the Orisha.

A practitioner might also observe the *mounting* of an Orisha. Once the Orisha has arrived, Orisha might dance or use their ritual objects to cleanse practitioners. For example, the Orisha *Ochún* might use her skirt to cleanse a practitioner, or the Orisha *Ogún* might blow cigar smoke over a practitioner. These, too, are considered Orisha dance and movements.

Not many are concerned with the correct dance technique in the ceremony because they are concerned with following ritual protocol to bring the Orisha down. Therefore, there are no intricate dance techniques or methodologies used to breakdown Orisha's dance and teach it to others in the ceremony. This allows for the community to come together with the common goal of celebrating the Orisha.

3.3.3 Negotiations

In this video performance, the group Yoruba Andabo sing the songs for *Ogún* while a dancer performs an interpretation of the Orisha *Ogún*.⁵² Though it can be read simply as a folkloric performance, there are many elements from Lucumí practice present. In the performance, there are some elements, such as *Ogún* prostrating in front of the singer on stage, a gesture usually reserved for a ceremony, that begs the question, “For what theatrical or ceremonial purpose was that particular Orisha movement included in the choreography?”

“I do not bring my religion to the stage. I respect my religion too much. I bring art, history, and information to the stage. I take the essence of the religion; dance, music, and song only, and I apply them within the rules of theater.” This quote comes from an Afro-Cuban folkloric teacher based in New York. Yet, I have heard variations of this statement from different Orisha dance instructors and performers. It is a statement of declared position by performing practitioners. They will not share the mysteries of the Lucumí tradition in performance.

The practitioner-instructor-performers and uninitiated interlocutors that I spoke with for this project all share their own experiences of having to negotiate their rules of engagement in Orisha folkloric dance classes and performances. This section details three major themes that have arisen from these conversations: 1) practitioner-dancers use their

⁵² Yoruba Andabo, “Yoruba Andabo - Oggún,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMAZgG3iwpU>

practice to inform their performance and instruction of Orisha dance, 2) practitioner-dancers use the tools of the practice to help set boundaries in folkloric performance and 3) uninitiated dancers negotiate within themselves how best to honor the Orisha in performance.

In the folkloric performance arena, practitioner-instructor-performers choose how best to represent themselves, their religion and Orisha dance in their artistry. Hagedorn uses the concept of hierophany to explain the negotiations performers engage.

“Hierophany, that is the manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object or place. The body is where ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ meet. It calls into question the performative categories implied by the terms ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ and forces participants to renegotiate their respective rules of engagement.” For practitioner-instructor-performers, at the most basic level, they must negotiate what aspects of Lucumí practice are sacred for them, meaning they should not be on stages and what aspects of the practice can be secularized and altered to be shared with the public via performance.

Practice Informs Performance and Instruction

Practitioner-instructor-performers are tasked with how best to represent their sacred practice on stage and in studio/folkloric classes. They each made it abundantly clear that folkloric instruction and performance are distinctly different from the ceremony for them. Babá Tony put it most simply:

When you're in the ceremony, you are in church. There is no thought about anything else but God; I say, ‘Orisha, I'm here. I am your child. I'm praying for this person. I'm praying for this person. I'm doing this for my soul, Orisha. I'm

doing this for stability. I'm doing it for health. I'm doing it for open roads. I'm doing it for peace of mind. I'm praying for this one that's sick.⁵³

Both in performance and in class, practitioners pull from the stories of the Orisha to provide an access point for their students or the audience. Iyá Michele describes her approach to folkloric performance as follows: “When performing, it is very much a show, right? And what you're trying to do is paint a picture or tell a story. You are clearly just channeling and embracing the Orisha, the energy, the spirit, and it's just very distinct in a ceremony. It's two distinct things for me.”

In order to make a clear distinction between ceremony and folkloric performance, performers employ different methodologies for developing choreography. Jonathan describes elements that are commonly used in folkloric performance to exemplify the distinction.

Folkloric performance is performance art focused on the story and building a story that's relatable to the audience makes Orisha dance make sense to the audience. Of course, like anything within the Cuban religion, there are many hidden messages in the performance. Still, there's a universal aspect to a lot of the stories and the philosophy behind them. So, there's a certain symbolic or artistic interpretation of religious values that you can do in the performance that makes sense. But performances are theatrical. There may be acting; there may be acrobatics, things like that. Things that you wouldn't see in a religious setting, you know, you're not going to be doing 10,000 jumps or rolls on the ground in the ceremony. We make it universal through the story, like ‘Oh, that must be a kid, because he’s playing around the stage. Oh, he's a warrior because he looks like he's fighting. Oh, that Orisha must really like the other one because he is winding himself upon her. In that way, we make it relatable to the people who are watching.’⁵⁴

⁵³ Babá Tony “Yemayá” Domenech, In discussion with author, December 2020.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Burke, In discussion with author, November 2020.

Universal principles and archetypes help to tell the story. Acrobatics and dramatization make the story more interesting. In this way, practitioner-instructor-performers seem to highlight the human characteristics of the Orisha in order to make the Orisha relatable without revealing the sacred rituals of Lucumí practice.

Tools of the Practice Help Set Boundaries

In my experience, Orishas “do what they want.” They decide when and how they will make their presence felt amongst humans. I always wondered how practitioners engage this reality. In studio/folkloric class and performance, practitioners, even if they are highlighting the human characteristics of the Orisha, and even if the songs and dances have been modified, are still singing the sacred songs, playing the sacred rhythms, and doing the sacred movements that invite the Orisha. Is it possible then, that one can truly prevent an Orisha from *mounting*? In some practitioners’ opinions, a person has done something wrong if an Orisha or co-presence *mounts* a student or performer during class or performance.

So, how does one keep the Orisha and co-presences at bay? How do they prepare themselves for a performance or class, and what do they do at the moment that the Orisha or co-presences start to manifest? Babá Tony comically shared that when preparing for a performance or class, he has a conversation with the Orisha: “I go and say to Orisha, ‘So listen, there's going to be live drums. There's going to be all of that good stuff you like. But check this out. Y'all aren't gonna embarrass me! Y'all not gonna embarrass me! We

are not doing that. When I'm working, don't touch [*mount*] me.” What Babá Tony describes can be understood as prayer or intention.

Iyá Michele also speaks about intention when preparing herself for folkloric performance:

So as a priestess, to prepare in general, you want to make sure you're as balanced as possible, right? When preparing, I typically do some spiritual things that my grandmother taught so that I can center myself so that I do not *mount* the Orisha because every setting is not appropriate for *mounting*. And also, it's just like taking a deep breath. And sometimes it's reminding yourself like, 'Hey, this is a performance woman, give a show.'⁵⁵

Prayer, intention, and grounding are practices practitioner-instructor-dancers employ when teaching a class. Babá Tony speaks about how he sets intentions for his classes and trusts that the Orisha support his work:

When I'm in class, Orisha knows exactly what my job is. I'm here to do a job. I'm not here to exorcise any type of demon; I'm not here to sanctify and save a soul. I'm not trying to get you saved—I'm not trying to do that. I'm here to give you a lesson. I don't amp up my classes for anyone to feel any type of spirit *mounting* them. I'll let you see the energy, not the spirit, honey. When I say the energy, the energy of the drum and the movement. Not the actual spirit which is the Orisha. I don't want you to feel the energy of anything coming down. I want you to feel the energy of what's going on around you and that drum.⁵⁶

Babá Tony shared that he is prepared, in both performances and classes, just in case the spirit of the Orisha or other co-presences do start to come down or manifest. He will slow himself or the class down, encourage people to breathe, and switch the class's rhythms and pace if necessary.

⁵⁵ Iyá Michele Stafford, In discussion with author, December 2020.

⁵⁶ Babá Tony “Yemayá” Domenech, In discussion with author, December 2020.

Negotiations of Non-Practitioner Dancers

Dancers who are not practitioners also find themselves negotiating how to best honor the Orisha and the practices they come from while also putting on a quality performance. Despite varying levels of knowledge about the religious practice, the interlocutors all expressed deep respect for the Orisha and Lucumí.

Bex shared how she honors the Orisha while also allowing the movements of the Orisha to flow into her Casino choreography:

I feel very connected to the experience of dancing Orisha. And so, when I think of choreography, I'm listening to music, I'm dancing, sometimes I'm putting the words to it, but I'm putting more of the beat to it. And if I'm working on a piece or something like that, and all of a sudden, an Orisha step comes out, to me, it just comes out. It's not like 'I'm gonna do this this count of eight, and then I'm gonna put this Orisha move in here because it would look cool.' That's what I don't do. What I do is I just dance. I come up with something. And if my soul says, you know, I'm doing *Oyá* here, then *Oyá* is going there. I'm not intentionally watering it down, you know? I know it's a very fine line. And I am fully aware of this, especially if I believe that you cannot dismiss the Orisha and the religious aspect of it. You can't. Like I mentioned, it's literally with the mindset that I'm still having respect for this Orisha.⁵⁷

While Bex is working through her beliefs and negotiations around including Orisha dance in her choreography, in this statement, she is careful to make sure that she expresses her respect for Orisha. Similarly, Willie shares that part of his respect for Orisha dance comes from his experience watching others connect to the Orisha through dance and from his experiences with his co-presences, specifically his grandmother,

⁵⁷ Rebecca Hernández, In discussion with author, January 2021.

As an Orisha dancer, you're not just executing the moves, but you also live in it. You need to get into it; you need to feel it. I am not a *religioso* (practitioner of the religion), but I have seen it, and I have felt that before when I have danced, when I have performed, and when I have watched others perform. You're not only executing the move, but you are elevating the Orisha. So, I have big, big respect, not just because of the Orishas but also because of my grandmother. I understand some levels of spirituality through my grandmother. I know the power of prayer. Some people are like, 'Oh, those are just myths. It's folklore,' and they don't acknowledge that it's a real spiritual thing. I have felt spirituality before, and I can see and feel it when people are doing it in Orisha dance. And that that means I have respect for it.⁵⁸

Though Bex and Willie do not have the language of Lucumí practice to explain what they experience and observe, they feel it. They try their best to maintain respect for the Orisha's energy in performance, and they also allow the energy to flow through their bodies in performance.

Teaching, learning, and performing Orisha dance will always include choice making. Practitioners and dancers engage the practice of Orisha dance with their bodies, minds, and co-presences. Depending on the level of history and context one knows, they might be able to understand and express more deeply their experience within Orisha dance. They might even be able to better facilitate or hinder their experience. Yet what is true is that no matter the level of understanding, Orisha dance as a practice demands a certain respect. To develop my pedagogy, I have also had to negotiate between the sacred aspects of my cultural and religious practice and the studio/folkloric settings in which I have learned Orisha dance.

⁵⁸ William Sánchez, In discussion with author, February 2021.

Chapter 4: Praxis: Developing My Critical Dance Pedagogy

4.1 Orisha Dance Pedagogy and the Dance Studies Canon

Like the practice of Lucumí itself, I have creatively adapted and syncretized scholarly, artistic and spiritual methods to create this study of history, embodiment, movement, and spiritual practice. The development of my Orisha dance pedagogy is informed by scholars in dance studies, who question pedagogy, or the practice of dance instruction. Edward C. Warburton notes, “what sometimes gets lost in the discussion of education in general, and dance education, in particular, is that pedagogy is itself a discipline that concerns the study of how *best* to teach.”⁵⁹ In my investigation of the instruction of Orisha dance in the studio/folkloric context and the ceremonial context, I apply the work of scholars such as Nyama McCarthy Brown, Ojeya Cruz Banks, and Sherry Shapiro to understand the pedagogical choice making of Orisha dance instructors and performers and to adapt and shape my own pedagogy.

Nyama McCarthy Brown applies Barry Kanpol’s framework for critical pedagogy, which is a teaching approach that examine systems of power, to the dancing body. McCarthy Brown calls the teaching approaches she has adapted for dance “critical dance pedagogy”. For McCarthy Brown, critical dance pedagogy “examines who gets to dance, in what spaces, with particular consideration of race class and gender.”⁶⁰ In her

⁵⁹ Warburton, *Dance Pedagogy*, 82.

⁶⁰ McCarthy Brown, *Dance Pedagogy for a Diverse World*, 18.

work with university level dance students, McCarthy Brown uses the critical dance pedagogy framework to facilitate student self-reflection around privilege within western dance forms. Critical dance pedagogy also asks instructors to question western dance methodologies that include authoritarian teaching methods and Eurocentric trajectories of dance history. Though my work does not center questions of student privilege in western dance forms, McCarthy Brown's discussions of who gets to dance and in what spaces provide guidance for my analysis of Orisha dance in both the studio/folkloric settings and ceremonial settings. In my work, I question the extent to which initiation into the Lucumí practice facilitates or hinders a dancer's access to the relevant ritual and historical context of Orisha dance. I also question whether access to the ritual and historical context of Orisha dance facilitates or hinders a dancer's ability to connect to the essence of the Orisha while dancing. Similarly, though I do not question Eurocentric trajectories of dance history, in the preceding chapter, I do analyze and question the history of Orisha dance from the Lucumí practice to its arrival in the U.S. I ask: Where does Orisha dance come from? What historical processes have shaped Orisha dance in Cuba and in the U.S.? and How is Orisha dance taught and learned in different contexts?

Related to critical dance pedagogy is Sherry Shapiro's work *Critical and Feminist Perspectives in Dance Education*. In this work, Shapiro discusses authoritarian approaches to teaching dance. "In most dance technique classes, the teacher is the authority and the only recognized source of knowledge... [classes] consist of learning how to follow directions and how to follow them well... and seems to be [guided by] the

authoritarian father in an individualistic world of every man for himself.”⁶¹ Inspired by instructors who use somatic approaches in instructing western dance forms, Shapiro cites the approach of empowering students to use their personal experience as a source of knowledge in dance class as a way to combat authoritarian paradigms in dance instruction. Shapiro states, “The role of the teacher, in the view of feminist and somatic educators, is to facilitate the student's process of becoming an expert of their bodies and lives by interrogating and analyzing their own experiences.”⁶² In developing my Orisha dance pedagogy, I do not rely on somatic approaches to facilitate participant’s engagement in self-reflection towards analyzing their own experience. I do, however, rely on teachings from the Lucumí practice to facilitate participants’ self-awareness and engagement with their co-presences, thus privileging their embodied knowledge and experiences. Though my pedagogy focuses on developing pathways within the self to engage with the energy and essence of the Orisha through movement and song, I intentionally start with students’ recognition of all they already have and know because I believe that dancers cannot engage the energy of the Orisha without first acknowledging their own energy and co-presences.

Ojeya Cruz Banks employs the term “critical postcolonial dance theory and practice” to describe how the instruction of African diaspora dance forms “is involved in the recuperation of cultural principles driven underground. It is dance contesting and

⁶¹ Shapiro, *Dance Power and Difference*, 25.

⁶² *Ibid*, 85.

correcting misconceptions of the African identity that derive from colonialism and racism.”⁶³ She cites the work of scholars-dancer-practitioners such as Yvonne Daniel and Katherine Dunham as examples of critical postcolonial dance theorists and practitioners. According to Cruz-Banks, Yvonne Daniel’s and Katherine Dunham’s work with Afro-Caribbean dances exemplifies much needed methods for integrating scholarly research in dance into to the Western dance community in service of diversifying the dance field and combating inherent colonial and racial structures that marginalize African derived dance forms.⁶⁴ In the development of my Orisha dance pedagogy, I undertake the work of recovering and revitalizing cultural knowledge embedded in Orisha dance by researching the histories and contexts where Orisha dance has developed, identifying and dissecting contemporary Orisha dance instruction methodologies and reconnecting the methodologies and practices to their origins in the Lucumí tradition. In my pedagogy, I then develop methodologies for instruction that are a product of the recontextualized Orisha dance practices.

The series of Cuban dance festivals, workshops and events developed by Yvonne Daniel in the late 1980s and 1990s were historic for their time. In these festivals, workshops and events at institutions like Stanford University, Smith College and the Colorado Dance Festival, Daniel was able to bring dancers and musicians from Cuba to teach a full range of Cuban and Afro-Cuban dance and music genres. In her discussion of

⁶³ Cruz Banks, *West African*, 16.

⁶⁴ Cruz Banks, *West African* and Cruz Banks *Katherine Dunham*.

these festivals, workshops and events, Daniel highlights her “Cross-Cultural model” for Cuban dance and music instruction. In this model, developed over ten plus- years, Daniel speaks about the methodology of personally teaching students by “making associations and movement bridges from dance material with which these students were very familiar”, before students learned from the master dance instructors and musicians. She also emphasized focusing on “immersion into Cuban culture and perfection of performance style.”⁶⁵ It seems that this cross-cultural model, despite including Cuban instructors and musicians is still defined based on its relationship to western dance forms. In order to ensure students’ acquisition of the movements and style towards performance, Daniel used references to ballet, modern and contemporary dance as a base line for engaging Cuban dance. In my efforts to recontextualize and recenter the Lucumí tradition, in my pedagogy I intentionally use Lucumí practice as the baseline for Orisha dance instruction. I believe it is important to for students no matter their previous dance background to use the ceremonial aspects of Lucumí practice, the sacred stories and characterizations of the Orisha and their own co-presences as a base line for engaging Orisha dance. Furthermore, my pedagogy is not focused on the performance trajectory and instead is focused on the offerings Orisha dance makes for a dancer’s internal journey.

Chapter 4 reveals how I have taken my research about Orisha dance pedagogy, dance practice, Lucumí religious and spiritual practice and transformed it into pedagogy

⁶⁵ Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 240 and 242.

facilitated during the *Orisha Dance Fête*, on March 12-13th, 2021. To start, I will restate my foundational and emerging beliefs about the Lucumí practice and Orisha dance. Then, I outline the *Orisha Dance Fête*, highlighting the pedagogical choices I made and the processes that informed the methodologies that I chose to implement.

4.2 Restating Foundational and Emerging Beliefs

The research I have conducted introduces new beliefs and reaffirms my previous beliefs about the Lucumí tradition as it relates to Orisha dance. Three beliefs definitively shape the way I construct Orisha Dance pedagogy:

1. Every individual is the site of multiple and converging spiritual energies and entities. These include but are not limited to their Higher Self, or *Ori Eledá*; their ancestors, or *Egun*; their other guardians, guides, and angels; the *Orisha*; and their own emotional, mental, and physical bodies.
2. Orisha dance, can support every individual. Every individual refers to both practitioners within the Lucumí tradition, regardless of their level of initiation and non-initiates with varying levels of dance experience. Within Orisha dance practice, some methodologies can help facilitate a dancer's connection to and awareness of spiritual co-presences and the Orisha.
3. Ceremonial methodologies and rituals can be used in Orisha dance instruction to support a dancer in channeling their awareness to engage with the spiritual energy of the Orisha. With respect to the Lucumí practice and proper practitioner support, dancers can safely engage their co-presences and the Orisha to work toward self-

awareness and engagement with otherwise realities through the mind-body-soul connection.

4.3 The Event: The Orisha Dance Fête

Originally, I planned the *the Orisha Dance Fête* as an event where participants would learn Orisha dance in the studio/folkloric style on day one and in the ceremonial style on day two. Thinking that most of the participants would be new to Orisha dance, I wanted them to experience first-hand the stark differences in methodological approaches within each context. I wanted to continue the conversation about comparing teaching and learning in each context through my pedagogy. As previously mentioned, each Orisha is manifested in particular aspects of nature. It was my goal to teach the movements and dances of the Orishas within the natural landscape they live in to offer participants an additional pathway for embodying the meanings and characterizations of the selected Orishas. With this in mind, I considered which natural landscapes would be available to me in Durham, North Carolina. I chose the Eno River State Park, which has a river where *Ochún* can be found and forest or woodlands, where *Ogún* can be found. In the Orishas' environment, participants could observe the beautiful complexities of the natural systems around them as a method for informing their Orisha movement.

Readily available to me were numerous dance studio spaces on Duke University's campus, but I chose a studio that most replicated the studio spaces I have learned Orisha dance in. The Rubenstein Arts Center's "Cube" felt the most appropriate for the studio/folkloric Orisha dance class, with its square space, wall of mirrors, and

specialized dance floor. We would learn Orisha dance technique alongside live drumming, and I would use the studio space structure, such as the mirrors and lines on the floor, to reinforce technical instruction of the dances of *Ochún* and *Ogún*.

Three factors changed the course of my original plan; Babá Oludaré's (Babá Olu) *Breathing With Orisha* framework, where I learned the dances of *Ochún* and *Ogún* over the course of four months, the development and evolution of my practice in the Lucumí tradition and of course COVID-19.

I say that my relationship with Babá Olu was divinely orchestrated by the Orisha in service of my thesis. As I scrolled through Instagram on a boring day during COVID quarantine in the early summer of 2020. I saw a beautiful child, maybe 6 years old, holding a fan, doing the dances of *Ochún*. Her grandmother, a Priestess of *Ochún*, is someone who I had befriended in the London Lucumí community. She tagged Babá Olu and credited him as the instructor that her granddaughter had been taking online classes from during the quarantine. I followed him immediately but never took one of his online classes. In late August, after completing my IRB process, I started to identify potential interlocutors. My *Madrina* connected me with Lucumí practitioners and Orisha dancers that she knew in the New York area, and Babá Olu was one of them. However, I did not reach out to Babá Olu in my first round of recruitment. I met Babá Olu in early November 2020 randomly, at a small gathering at one of my spiritual homes that is unaffiliated with the Lucumí practice: The Healing Lodge of the Children of Two Shields. We spoke briefly about my research, and I asked him if he would be interested in

being the lead musician for *The Orisha Dance Fête*, to which he agreed. When I mentioned that I was still searching for a knowledgeable instructor to support me in further learning the dances of *Ochún* and *Ogún*, he made himself available. In the COVID times, I had found a master musician and a dance instructor all in one.

After almost five, ninety-minute sessions together, Babá Olu finally introduced the dance technique for *Ochún*. We had spent the first five sessions learning how to “*Breathe With the Orisha*.” Similarly, to the way I describe Orisha's ceremonial movement as being considered Orisha dance, Babá Olu considers the breathwork he has developed to be Orisha dance. As a student of Babá Olu's, I learned about the sacred relationship between the sites of consciousness in the body within Lucumí practice; the *Orí Inu* (the belly), *Okan* (the heart), and *Orí Eledá* (the head). I experienced through practice how *Emí* (the breath) creates a pathway in the body that facilitates engagement with sacred consciousness, *Olódumare*, and the Orisha. Babá Olu told me in one of our Zoom sessions, “Our ancestors knew about the power of the relationship between the *Orí Inu*, *Okan*, and *Orí Eledá*, and they intentionally incorporated the breath and that pathway; into the movement.” The breath for Babá Olu was everything; it was the impetus for the movement. It is why we spent five sessions just breathing; just clearing and fortifying the pathway of the breath through the sites of consciousness. There would be no Orisha dance without it. My *Breathing With Orisha* practice felt like the piece I was missing in all my years of studying Orisha dance. The dances of *Ochún* and *Ogún* flowed in my body differently; I was able to engage with their energies and

characteristics more deeply. *Breathing With Orisha* quickly became a tool I wanted to continue to use and include in my own pedagogy during *The Orisha Dance Fête*.

As previously mentioned, I had always planned to include the Lucumí practice's ceremonial aspects in my pedagogy. I frequently consulted with my *Madrina*, who has more knowledge about ceremonial protocol than I as my elder in the practice. She informed me that there were some aspects I could share with the public, such as having an altar for the Orisha, where participants could leave offerings and make prayers, and having ceremonial objects charged (blessed) by the Orisha that participants could touch and engage with. For me, that would have been enough; I could respectfully facilitate participants' engagement with the energy of the Orisha through the natural elements, the altars, and ceremonial objects in ways that were very similar to the way that we engage the Orisha in the ceremony. However, in a *divination reading*, I was told, "either you are doing full-on ceremony, or you're not." Up until this point, as I mentioned, I was planning on having one day that included ceremonial aspects. Yet, in preparation to organize and facilitate the event, I was engaging in deep spiritual work and transformation – the breathwork with Babá Olu; my daily prayers and meditations in the morning and at night, the ritual cleansings received from my *Madrina*; offerings to the Orisha, and the deep scholarly study of Lucumí practice were all pushing me deeper into my personal spiritual practice. I was planning to bring myself, charged and transformed by spiritual work, to replicate complex and even questionable methodologies for teaching a folklorized studio Orisha dance class on one day and limited ceremonial class on day

two. This was not enough for the Orisha, my *Egun*, and other co-presences. So, they told me to choose “either you are doing full-on ceremony, or you’re not.” In reality, I didn’t really have a choice, but I chose a full-on ceremony. Though I have not trained in a folkloric dance school such as the Cuban National School of the Arts, I have spent eight years studying Orisha dance with Cuban trained instructors from around the world. Despite having studied Orisha dance for eight years, I have chosen not to teach Orisha dance up until this point, out of what Marisol Blanco in her Instagram post calls a respect for the Cuban culture. I did not feel qualified to teach Orisha dance because I felt I did not have enough knowledge about the Lucumí practice, the Orishas and the multiple rhythms, songs and dances for the Orishas. Yet, through this artistic research, I have been able to integrate my eight-year Orisha dance study with an extended and intentional dance study with Babá Olu, and in depth scholarly and religious study about the history of the Lucumí practice, the Orisha and Orisha dance. Though I still felt unqualified to teach in ways, the Orisha themselves encouraged me and reaffirmed that I was indeed qualified and ready to share my own Orisha dance pedagogy. Being qualified and ready meant that I was no longer teaching one day of studio/folkloric Orisha dance and one day of ceremonial Orisha dance. The *Orisha Dance Fête* would have to transform into a two-day ceremonial event that featured Orisha dance.

COVID-19 has caused a significant shift in how we engage with each other and definitely the ways we teach and learn dance. Of the many adjustments that I had to make to ensure my event would take place, the most impactful was the locations for my classes.

Instead of being indoors at the Rubenstein Arts Center for day one, I moved the class to an outdoor space behind The Ark, a building and dance studio housing part of the Duke Dance Program. For day two, I could not host my event at the Eno River State Park, (which is considered a public space), and instead, with special permission had to move the event to the Duke Gardens. Fortunately, the Duke Gardens have a freshwater body, where *Ochún* dwells, and forest/woodlands where *Ogún* dwells. These changes happened within weeks of the event, yet in the end, they proved to be more beneficial to the implementation of my pedagogy.

Below is an outline of the *Orisha Dance Fête*, in its elevated iteration as a two-day ceremonial event featuring Orisha dance.

Day 1: Friday, March 12th- 2:00-7:00pm outside in the field behind The Ark.

Friday Before Participants Arrive 2:00-4:00pm

- Feed the land and make prayers on the land
- Set up *Egun* altar and give libation
- Set up *Eshu/Eleggua* altar
- Set up Orisha throne (altar)
- Support the musicians in getting settled in

Workshop 4:00- 6:30

1. Introductions (4:00-4:05)
 - a. Introduce myself
 - b. Introduce my *Madrina*
 - c. Introduce Babá Olu
 - d. Introduce musicians
 - e. Introduce other members of the community who are supporting the work
2. Prayers at the Throne (4:05-4:15)
 - a. Iyá Nina opens the event with prayers in front of the Orisha throne
3. Introduce *Ochún* and *Ogún*. (4:15-4:30)

- a. Explain who each Orisha is and how we will work with their energy in class today
- 4. Introduce the *Breathing With Orisha* Framework (4:30-4:40)
 - a. Explanation and practice of the *Breathing With Orisha* method
- 5. *Ogún* dance class (4:40-5:25)
- 6. BREAK (5:25-5:30)
- 7. *Ochún* dance Class (5:30-6:15)
- 8. Closing out the Workshop (6:15-6:30)
 - a. Allow students to settle, ask questions, and reflect after class

Day 2: Saturday, March 13th, 8:00am-4:00pm in the Duke Gardens

Saturday Before Participants Arrive 8:00-11:00 am

- Feed the land and make prayers on the land
- Set up *Egun* altar and give libation
- Set up *Eshu/Elegguá* altar
- Set up Orisha throne (altar)
- Support the musicians in getting settled in

Workshop 11:00am-3:00pm

1. A Welcome to Day 2 (11:00-11:05)
 - a. Reintroduce everyone
2. Prayers at the throne (11:10-11:15)
 - a. Iyá Nina opens the event with prayers in front of the Orisha throne
3. Explanation of the throne and the installation (11:15- 11:45)
 - a. Iyá Nina will explain the throne and how to engage with it
 - b. Namajala will explain the installation
 - c. Participants will have time to leave offerings at the throne, make prayers and engage with the items in the installation
4. *Ogun* Song and Movement Class (11:50-1:05)
 - a. Song class (11:50-12:35) (45 mins)
 - b. Movement dancing singing (12:35-1:05) (30 mins)
5. BREAK (1:05-1:30)
6. *Ochún* Song and Movement Class (1:30-2:45)
 - a. Song class (1:30-2:15) (45 mins)
 - b. Movement dancing singing (2:15-2:45) (30 mins)
7. Closing out the Workshop (2:45-3:30)
 - a. Allow participants to settle, ask questions, and reflect after class

b. Participants will leave an offering with Eshu/Elegguá

With the brief overview and understanding of the *Orisha Dance Fête* structure, in greater detail I will now explain the methodologies I chose to incorporate into my pedagogy and the influences that shaped those choices for the two-day event.

The transformation of my event into a two-day ceremony featuring Orisha dance necessitated the inclusion of significant ritual practices. The ritual practices, in general, were done to acknowledge, make offerings to, and celebrate my *Egun*, the Orisha, and other co-presences that support me. Rituals were also done as part of the ceremony to ensure that the sacred space where participants would engage their own co-presences would be energetically supported and made safe by more powerful spiritual presences. Some of the rituals occurred before participants arrived, and others were included as moments of explicit instruction for participants about Lucumí practice. Rituals that occurred before the participants arrived were done on both days. This included feeding the land and setting up altars and thrones to my *Egun* and the Orisha. Feeding the land is not a common practice in the Lucumí tradition, but I have indigenous/aboriginal heritage. With permission from the Duke Gardens staff, I included the ritual of spreading a mixture of sacred herbs across the land where we were going to dance. As a way to honor *Egun* I made prayers acknowledging the spirit of the land itself and the indigenous/aboriginal people who inhabited the land before us. There was an *Egun* shrine at each location, where I made offerings and prayers to my ancestors, asking for their support during the event. There were shrines and thrones set up where the Orisha resided in *pots* or vessels.

There was a shrine at the event space entrance that housed *Eshu* and *Elegguá* and a throne that housed *Ochún*, *Ogún*, *Ochosi*, *Elegguá*, and *Ósun*. At both the shrine and the throne, offerings and prayers were made to acknowledge the Orisha and petition their support and protection during the event. On both days, after my brief welcome and introduction, my *Madrina* opened the ceremonial space by making prayers to the Orisha at the throne. Before the event, my *Madrina* poured libation and petitioned *egun* as a way to honor all of my ancestors as well as those that would be present, including those of the participants. And with everyone present, she was able to pray to Orisha on behalf of all the attendees. As a ceremony, it was important to make offerings to, and acknowledge all spiritual entities supporting me and my artistic research. Additionally, these entities would support attendees over the course of the two days.

In my research, Belasio de Jesus, Daniel, and Matory spoke about co-presences and people being the convergence of multiple spiritual entities. I thought about my interlocutors Willie and Bex, who shared that Orisha dance for them invokes their connections to their co-presences and ancestors. In the journey to embody the characteristics and essence of the Orisha, I wanted to develop an Orisha dance pedagogy that didn't just skip to the Orisha but welcomed participants to engage with all of the embodied spiritual knowledge and presences they already have. Through my own practice, I see *Breathing With Orisha* as a methodology facilitating individual engagement with co-presences. As a vehicle to connect to the Orisha, it was important to include this process on both days of the fête. I taught the *Breathing With Orisha*

framework as it had been taught to me by Babá Olu augmenting the structure with additional tools I have cultivated in my practice to ground participants in the richness of their own experiences. Each day, in an effort to continuously move participants towards embodying the characterizations and essence of the Orishas for which they were dancing, I referenced the pathway of the belly, heart, and head. When added to the technical dance steps and movements of the Orishas, the pathway helps to facilitate participants' ability to integrate their co-presences, the characterizations of the Orishas and their own intentions for the movements.

In Chapter 1 I discussed the processes practitioners and dancers used in the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (Cuban national folkloric company) to develop folkloric Orisha dance. In Chapter 3 I discussed the strategies my interlocutors use to teach and perform Orisha dance. As a continuation of these earlier dialogues concerning Orisha dance pedagogy, I also negotiated to what extent I would include teaching frameworks from the studio/folkloric setting in my own Orisha dance pedagogy. On both days, I made sure to include context about the Lucumí practice and relevant information about *Ochún* and *Ogún*. I spent time reviewing musicality so that participants would be clear about how to enter the movement. I encouraged participants to bring and use folkloric or skirts resembling folkloric skirts while dancing for *Ochún*. I also used my folkloric skirt while dancing for *Ochún* so that participants could have a visual representation of how to use the skirts in the dance. For instruction, I made use of multiple formations: facing the participants and teaching, turning my back to participants and teaching, having

participants dance across the land in lines, having participants dance in a large community circle, and having participants spread out and explore the land while doing the movement sequence in their own time. Multiple dance orientations allowed students multiple access points for viewing the movements and supported their understanding and practice of the individual and communal aspects Orisha dance.

I used stories to help participants develop understanding of the characterizations and essence of the Orisha and the dances of the Orisha. I did not explicitly share stories from the *Odu Ifá*. Yet, I explained how the characterizations used to set intentions for the dances for *Ochún* and *Ogún* came from the sacred stories in the *Odu Ifá*. I used the descriptions of both Orishas to invite participants to weave their own stories. We used the focused, intentional, and heart-driven nature of *Ogún* to cut away that which does not serve us and to cut a path towards our heart's desires. To obtain our heart's desires, we used the fluid, sweet and abundant nature of *Ochún* to bestow upon ourselves blessings of abundance and kindness.

Though both days had transformed into ceremony, I chose particular methodologies for Orisha dance instruction for day one that differ significantly from the methodologies used on day two. The biggest methodological difference is my choice to explicitly teach Orisha dance technique on day one and not teach Orisha dance technique on day two. In the spirit of my original plan, which included a studio/folkloric Orisha dance class, I chose to intentionally teach Orisha dance technique for both *Ochún* and *Ogún*. This included scaffolded instruction for the movements and timing for footwork,

the torso, and the arms. I spent time giving feedback to the participants about how to engage their knees to add the *molleyo*, how to emphasize the movements of their chests, how to use their arms to intensify the cutting movements for *Ogún*, and how to use specific gestures for *Ochún* to emphasize her characterizations. Although there were many ceremonial aspects introduced on day one, the major goal was to introduce some aspects of Orisha dance technique. To support understanding and embodiment of the Orishas' characterizations and essence in a short amount of time, it was important for participants to be equipped with dance techniques for *Ochún* and *Ogún* from the studio/folkloric setting.

I structured day two in a way that allowed participants to both learn more about and participate in the rituals of Lucumí practice. I encouraged participants to wear white and bring offerings for the Orishas on day two. Wearing white signifies cleanliness and openness; participant's offerings signify their participation and contribution of their *aché* (power and energy) to the ceremonial space. My *Madrina* Iyá Nina and her husband *Babalawo* Babá Lance Mack taught participants about the ceremonial throne. They introduced the participants to each of the Orishas that were present, spoke about the objects and offerings on the throne. Attendees were encouraged to use specific ceremonial objects to call and make their own personal prayers to the Orisha. Participants were told they could not touch the objects on the throne but were welcome to engage with replicas of the ceremonial objects that were set up in an installation. Objects included a

folded fan, hand mirror, brass bell, gold fabric, and honey for *Ochún*. A machete, *mariwo* or grass skirt, green fabric, railroad spikes, and maraca were installed for *Ogún*.

Singing is an integral part of ceremony; I made sure to include song as part of my pedagogy. Led by Babá Oludaré and musicians Beverly Botsford and Richard Vinesett, participants sat with the musicians in a wooded part of the Duke Gardens to learn the song for *Ogún* and near the lake to learn the song for *Ochún*. As part of the song classes, participants received more information about both Orishas and the call-and-response relationship between the drums and singing. Participants learned the creole Yoruba language lyrics and what the song express about each Orisha's character. Participants then practiced singing alongside the musicians.

To realize the ceremonial nature of the Lucumí practice, with the leadership of Babá Olu as the lead drummer and singer, I guided participants in a less structured movement class, where participants were encouraged to sing. I intentionally chose not to re-teach the Orisha dance technique. Instead, I encouraged participants to continue to engage their co-presences and allow the bodily memory of the Orisha dance technique they learned the day before, to resurface and to incorporate the song into their movement story. To engage with their co-presences, I led a warm-up that included the *Breathing With Orisha* methodology. I then asked participants to remind themselves of their heart's desire, what they cut away and cleared a path for while dancing for *Ogún*, and the abundance they bestowed on themselves while dancing for *Ochún* the day before. For students who might have needed more structure, I provided a movement sequence with

set counts resembling the sequence from the previous day. I also welcomed students to deviate from that sequence and implement the movements in their own sequencing and counts. Finally, after learning the songs and integrating the songs into the movement, I encouraged students to move around the space, sing, and dance. By following their own inspirations during this time, participants were honoring both their co-presences and the Orisha and embodying their own intention for their lives.

At the close of the second day, I encouraged participants to take a moment to settle themselves and reflect on all that they had received across the two days. I asked for formal feedback about their experiences in the *Orisha Dance Fête*. In alignment with ceremonial practice, participants were also asked to give provided offerings to *Eshu* and *Elegguá* to formally close the two-day event.

Chapter 5: Reflections and Feedback from *The Orisha Dance Fête*

The musicians played the *Yakota* rhythm (a specific rhythm from the musical corpus) for *Ochún* in a low tone. I opened up my instruction by speaking about how we had cleared the pathway to our heart's desires with the energy of *Ogún*, and that now, we would welcome the abundance, kindness, and sweetness of *Ochún* because we deserved it. And then the sun came out. Beautiful golden sun. Just enough to brighten up the outside, but not enough to be too hot. It felt like *Ochún* was there with us, affirming and supporting our inward journeys. First, I am clear that I could reflect on the event for the rest of my life. It was such a sublime nexus of my spiritual, artistic, dance, and community journeys. Yet, in this Chapter, I focus on the feedback and reflections from the participants about their experiences of the *Orisha Dance Fête*.

In this section, I share feedback received from participants at the end of the *Orisha Dance Fête*. I gave participants a form with ten questions and invited them to fill it out in person, text or email me their responses, after taking time to process their experience. Because of the option to take the responses home, I did not receive feedback from every participant, but out of the twelve dancing participants, I received nine responses. Of the nine participants who responded, for two, this was their first Orisha dance class.

I will highlight responses from two of the ten questions. The full list of reflection questions is available in the Appendix at the end of this work. Then, I will share general

feedback from some of the other questions and close with feedback shared amongst all the responses, but not explicitly asked in the reflection questions.

In response to the question “What was most helpful for you while learning the dances of the Orisha?” participants shared the following methodologies that they felt were most helpful:

- Building slowly
- The breathing practice (*Breathing With Orisha*)
- Learning the history and background of the Orisha

Participants appreciated the scaffolded instruction of the Orisha dance technique on Friday and the scaffolded instruction about Lucumí practice across the weekend. One participant shared that starting with the breath, then the basic steps, then a movement combination, using the combination in different formations and having time to move more freely made her feel less intimidated by the form. Another participant shared that learning the dance, the practice, and the song at different times, and slowly over the course of the weekend, then merging them together helped her feel more successful. Participants with prior experience in Orisha dance technique classes shared that the *Breathing With Orisha* practice helped them to engage the movement in a way they had not before. Instead of forcing the *molleyo* with the knees, one participant shared how the breath pathway helped her to access the pulsation in the movement more consistently. Finally, multiple participants shared that learning about the personality, tools and characterizations of *Ochún* and *Ogún* along with learning about Lucumí practice helped them to better embody the movements. One participant shared that it wasn't just the

information that helped them to better embody the movements. The methods I used to prompt students to use their personal experiences to channel the characterizations of the Orishas into movement supported their ability to converge the information about the Orishas, their own experiences and the movements together.

In response to the question “At any point in this weekend do you feel you accessed the energy of *Ochún* or *Ogún*? How? Why?” All the participants said “Yes” and shared that they felt like they accessed the energy of the Orishas most when:

- They were dancing and singing at the same time
- Being at the throne

Almost all of the participants shared that they felt they accessed the energy of either Orisha while dancing, and some also shared feeling the energy while dancing and singing. One participant felt she accessed the energy of *Ogún* not because she was trying to be *Ogún* but because she had internalized *Ogún*'s characteristics. She felt connected to him because of what his characteristics meant to her. She saw those same characteristics manifested in her own life and used the connection to help fuel her movement. A participant who felt most connected while singing and dancing, shared that having to move and sing at the same time forced her to focus only on the energy of *Ochún*. Because of that focus, she felt she was engaging directly with *Ochún*'s energy. A few participants mentioned feeling like they accessed the energy of either Orisha when they were near the throne and when either they or Iyá Nina was praying. One participant

mentioned that standing near the throne while Iyá Nina was praying made her feel like the Orisha were standing behind her.

All the participants appreciated being able to physically engage with the objects they were being asked to utilize metaphorically in the dances' gestures. Holding the objects from the installation brought to life the dance's metaphors, such as the hand mirror *Ochún* holds for self-reflection and self-awareness. The most popular item in the installation was the machete. Participants mentioned feeling the weight of the metal and the power in the tool itself. They used their physical experience holding the machete as a way to inform their dancing. The singing is where there was the most disparity in the feedback. Some participants really enjoyed the singing, and some felt intimidated by the singing. None of the participants who felt intimidated shared that they felt so intimidated they stopped participating. Yet, they mentioned that it brought them out of the feeling and embodied space they were in. For others, singing while dancing propelled them into a deeper sense of feeling, embodiment, and connection to themselves and the Orisha's energy.

Though I did not ask about community, in all of the feedback I received, participants mentioned in one question or another how they appreciated the sense of community and safety they felt. They mentioned how being amongst others while singing and dancing made them feel more connected to the experience. They also mentioned the multiple educators and practitioners such as Iyá Nina, her husband *Babalawo* Babá Lance, and Babá Olu, who led prayers and rituals, taught about the ceremonial aspects,

taught song classes, and generally supported the work. With experienced practitioners around and with the amount of history and context they were learning, participants felt connected and that they could be vulnerable in the space.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Future Praxis

The success of the *Orisha Dance Fête* answers a definitive yes, to the question inspiring my research: is it possible to re-integrate Lucumí practice with folkloric Orisha dance in a way that is both respectful to the mysteries of the Lucumí tradition and supportive of the multiple aspects of a dancer's personhood? Through my academic research, ethnographic study, personal spiritual journey, and my community within the Lucumí tradition, I was able to develop my critical Orisha dance pedagogy. The academic research provides a history of the Lucumí practice, highlighting its living, creative and adaptable nature. The research helped me to uncover processes such as folklorization, that significantly impacted the Lucumí practice and the practice of Orisha dance in Cuba and in the United States and highlights the negotiations that occurred between practitioners and institutions to produce folkloric Orisha dance.

The ethnography of Orisha dance pedagogy provides a conversation amongst practitioners and Orisha dance instructors, students and performers about contemporary methodologies for teaching and performing Orisha dance. The experiences of the interlocutors support the fact that practitioners, instructors and performers are still negotiating, at the level of their bodies, the best ways to represent their religion, their culture, Orisha dance and Orisha dance performance.

I introduce the academic research about the history of Lucumí practice and the ethnographic study to conversations about critical Orisha dance pedagogy to firmly assert my work's contribution to the field of dance studies. My work builds on the legacies of

Lucumí ceremonial practice as a framework to provide a student-centered Orisha dance pedagogy that emphasizes the spiritual aspects of a dancer's personhood. This pedagogy was developed not just through academic and ethnographic research but included the knowledge and wisdom of my elders in the Lucumí tradition, and my own personal spiritual and artistic practice.

The first iteration of my Orisha dance pedagogy was facilitated in a two-day event entitled the *Orisha Dance Fête*. Reflecting on the success of the *Orisha Dance Fête*, I also look towards future possibilities for my Orisha dance pedagogy in acknowledgement that this work is a key component of my life's work as a Lucumí practitioner, dancer and scholar.

I am grateful for the opportunities that being a student at Duke University has provided for the development of my Orisha dance pedagogy. Yet, musings about future iterations of my dance pedagogy are centered around Orisha dance practice outside of University institutions. Leaving the MFA program will mean re-entering the dance studio culture. As mentioned previously in this work, the dance studio culture comes with particular benefits and challenges. Specifically, I am thinking about how best to introduce the ceremonial aspects of Lucumí practice into the studio setting. Doing so presents unique parameters such as the allotment of time for classes, regulations about what types of substances can be present, and the emphasis on dance technique. In the studio setting, I also think about what it means to support a dancer's awareness and engagement with the energy of their co-presences and the Orisha. As participants indicated, feelings of safety

and vulnerability surfaced while dancing and singing in the ritual space. I believe this occurred because of the community of practitioners present at my event. I am considering what it means to have multiple educators and practitioners in the studio setting. I would need to find collaborators who are willing to dedicate the time and energy to consistently supporting my classes until I myself become a priestess in the Lucumí tradition. I also consider what it means to encourage and facilitate a dancer's inward and spiritual journey. Like my interlocutors, I will need to have many tools to support dancers as they move through potentially difficult emotional and spiritual spaces. Though I have many components to consider, I am confident that just like my work for this thesis, I will be able to creatively apply multiple academic, artistic and spiritual methodologies to continue to develop my critical Orisha dance pedagogy.

-Amen, Amin, Aché and Aho.

Glossary

Aborisha: A Lucumí word for a person who has received one of the entry levels of initiation into the Lucumí practice and has yet to receive the final crowning initiation or ordination ceremony, making him/her a priest/priestess.

Aché/Ashé: The spiritual power of the universe; dynamic essence or divine life force of all people and things. This word has many meanings depending on context including “so be it,” talent, energy, fate, grace, wisdom, life, and power.

Babá: Translated as “father;” denotes a male Lukumí priest. Is used as a sign of respect for a person’s priesthood status and for their crowning or governing Orisha.

Babalawo: A male high priest of the Ifá divination system. An initiate of the Orisha, *Orínmila*.

Batá: The three sacred, double headed drums used in Lucumí ceremonies or Lucumí folkloric classes and performances.

Bembé: A drumming ceremony in the Lucumí practice. Also called a *tambor* or drumming.

Casino: A Cuban popular partner dance from the 1950s that has origins in the Cuban genres of *Son* and *Danzón*. Contemporarily danced to *timba* music. Sometimes referred to as “Cuban salsa.”

Crowning Initiation: The ordination ritual that makes someone a priest/priestess by placing the aché of their governing Orisha onto their heads.

Danzón: A 19th-century ballroom couples dance genre originating in Cuba.

Divination Reading: A reading done by an *Olorisha* or *Babalawo* on behalf of a client who consults with the Orishas to advise the client.

Emí: Breath. Life-giving energy bestowed by *Olódumare*. Humans are considered inanimate until they are given life by *Olódumare*.

Egun: One’s ancestors: the dead; those blood relatives or other ancestral spirits related to a person by blood or *Ocha* initiation.

Elegguá: Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon responsible for opening and closing doors and is generally characterized as an old man or a trickster. The messenger of the Orishas, and the first and last Orisha to be honored in Lucumí ceremony. There are 256 paths of this deity in Ifá and 101 paths in Ocha.

Eshu: An alternate name for the Orisha known as Elegguá. There are 256 paths of this deity in Ifá and 101 paths in Ocha.

Garabato: A stick in the shape of the number 7 that Elegguá uses to open and close the pathways.

Guerreros Initiation: One of the first initiations in the Lucumí practice where one receives the four warrior Orishas (*Elegguá, Ogún, Ochosi, and Ósun*).

Ifá: An ancient divination system of Yoruba and Lucumí origin.

Ilé: A spiritual house or family led by a priest/priestess in the Lucumí tradition.

Iyá: Translated as “mother;” denotes a female Lukumí priest. Is used as a sign of respect for a person’s priesthood status and for their crowning or governing Orisha.

Madrina: A Spanish word for godmother; within the Lucumí tradition, it refers to the relationship between the practitioner and the elder priestess that guides them along their spiritual journey.

Mariwo: A grass, raffia skirt worn by Ogún.

Molleyo: The rhythmic pulse in the body that is facilitated by the rocking and bending of the knees while dancing.

Mount (-ing, -ed): The process by which an Orisha shares the body with a practitioner during the ceremony in order to manifest in the physical reality.

Moyuba/Mojuba: A prayer that gives homage or praise to *Orisha* or *egun*.

Obá Oriaté: High-ranking priest in the Lucumí religion.

Obatalá: Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon, the head Orisha, one who molds the human form in heaven. Represents justice, knowledge, wisdom, clarity of mind, patience, health.

Ocha: An abbreviated word for *Orisha* and often used as a shortened form of *Regla de Ocha*. Another word used to describe the Lucumí religious practice.

Ochosi: Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon, one of the Orishas received in the *Guerreros initiation*. The Orisha of justice who governs hunting and focused determination.

Ochún/Oshún: An Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon governing freshwater, rivers, magic, love, prosperity, sweetness, and fertility.

Odu Ifá: Sacred collection of 256 *odu* or scriptures in the Lucumí and Yoruba tradition. The basis of the Ifá divination system, which was revealed by the Orisha *Orúnmila*. A philosophical corpus that contains specific legends, verses, proverbs, and sacrifices related to Lucumí cosmology.

Ogún: Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon. He is said to govern iron, metal and technology. Lives in the forest/woodlands. One of the Orishas received in the *Guerreros initiation*.

Okan: Lucumí term for the heart.

Olódumare: The one supreme God in Lucumí cosmology. The Creator.

Olófin/Olófi: Another name for God, recognized as “God on earth.”

Olorisha: A priest or priestess in an Orisha tradition.

Olorún: Another name for God, meaning the owner of the heavens or the sun.

Orí Eledá: The Lucumí term means the head, specifically the site of consciousness in the head.

Orí Inu: Lucumí word for the belly, refers to the site of consciousness that exists in the gut/lower abdomen.

Orisha: A contraction meaning “select head” and a reference to the divinities in the Lucumí pantheon that are manifestations and extensions of the *aché* of *Olódumare*.

Orúnmila: The Orisha of the Ifá priesthood. Also known as *Orúnla* or *Orula*.

Ósun: Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon that is received in the *Guerreros initiation*. Guards against danger and represents a person’s connection to their *Orí* and to *Olófin*.

Oyá: Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon. She is a female warrior who is said to govern wind, lightning, and transformation. She can be found at the marketplace and at the gates of cemeteries.

Palo Mayombe: An Afro-Cuban religious practice that originates from the Bantu people of the Congo.

Pots: Refers to the vessels, usually ceramic, that hold the sacred stones and implements that embody an Orisha's *aché*. Also called *soperas*, Spanish word for "soup tureen."

Santero/a: A priest or priestess of Santería.

Regla de Ocha: Translated from Spanish as the "Rule of Ocha" (or the "Rule of Orisha"). Another term to describe Lucumí practice. Sometimes shortened to *Ocha*.

San Lázaro: Spanish translation of Saint Lazarus, a saint that was syncretized with the Orisha Babalu Ayé, an Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon. He is said to govern infectious diseases and support the sick and homeless.

Santería: Literally translated as "worship of the saints" or "way of the saints," a reference to the syncretized practice of worshipping the Orishas by way of the Catholic saints in Cuba. Though the term is still used by many present-day Lucumí adherents, it's considered by many to be a derogatory term based on dismissive attitudes of the Catholic Church to categorize worshippers of the saints in 19th century Cuba and followers of African-based spiritual practices. Others choose not to use the term "Santería" because of fanatical and inaccurate portrayals of the practice that persist in modern culture.

Shangó: Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon. He once lived on earth as a king and is said to govern thunder. His followers look to him for support in business, strategy, overcoming obstacles, and finding joy in life.

Son: See *Danzón*.

Throne/Trono: A sacred altar that is constructed for an Orisha or Orishas for special occasions and ceremonies.

Timba: A popular Cuban music genre developed in the 1950s that remains popular today. Accompanies Casino dance.

Warriors: The four Orisha that a practitioner first receives in the *Guerreros Initiation*; *Eleggua*, *Ogún*, *Ochosi*, and *Ósun*.

Yakota: A rhythm played on the *batá* drums. Though the *Yakota* rhythm does not belong to a single Orisha, each Orisha who has a *Yakota* rhythm has specific song lyrics that highlights the story of the Orisha.

Yemayá: Orisha in the Lucumí pantheon. Is the great mother of the world, is said to govern saltwater and the oceans.

Appendix A

Reflection Questions For Participants

1. Is this your first Orisha dance class?
2. What were you thinking about when learning/dancing for either Orisha?
3. What were you feeling when you were learning/dancing for either Orisha?
4. What was most helpful for you while learning the dances of the Orisha?
5. How did you feel while engaging the objects?
6. Was there an object that stood out to you? Why?
7. How did you feel while you were singing?
8. At any point this weekend do you feel that you accessed deeper parts of yourself?
Why?
9. At any point this weekend do you feel that you accessed the energy of Ochún or
Ogun? How? Why?
10. Please share any additional reflections.

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