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Movement as Cultural Memory: Investigating the Preservation and Adaptation of Afro-Cuban Dance in the U.S. Diaspora

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Abstract: This paper examines how Afro-Cuban dance is preserved and adapted as embodied cultural memory in the United States. Drawing on scholarly research and participant observation conducted in New York City and Miami during the summer of 2026, the author has investigated how Afro-Cuban dance is taught outside Cuba and how cultural meaning is maintained as traditions move across geographic and cultural environments. The research considers the relationship between movement, rhythm, history, spirituality, symbolism, and communal participation. Through dance classes and cultural instruction, the author observed different approaches to transmitting Afro-Cuban traditions. In New York City, Afro-Cuban movement was taught within a broader environment of African diasporic dance traditions, emphasizing connections across cultural and movement practices. In Miami, instruction more directly connected the Cuban folkloric movement to specific histories and social practices. These experiences demonstrated that learning Afro-Cuban dance involves more than reproducing physical steps; instructors also transmit the cultural knowledge and meanings connected to those movements. Adaptation does not necessarily result in cultural loss. Afro-Cuban dance can change as it enters new locations, classrooms, generations, and performance settings while continuing to preserve cultural memory. When movement remains connected to its historical, musical, spiritual, and communal foundations, adaptation can become a means through which cultural traditions continue to survive and develop across the African diaspora.

Author keywords: Lucum; Orishas; transculturation; embodied memory; batá

Introduction

Rather than a singular, monolithic genre, Afro-Cuban dance comprises a vibrant constellation of sacred and secular practices forged across distinct African-derived religious and cultural lineage traditions.[1] Its meanings extend far beyond physical movement; Afro-Cuban rituals and celebrations integrate gesture, sound, language, music, and dance into what scholar Arnedo[2] conceptualizes as "orchestrations of media."

As Afro-Cuban traditions migrate across geographical borders, they demonstrate remarkable adaptability while preserving their core cultural foundations.[3] Moreno Vega[4] explains that their transformations throughout the African diaspora have expanded their meanings while central spiritual principles have remained constant. However, when movement is separated from its religious, historical, and communal contexts, a living cultural practice risks being reduced to an "exotic fragment" or transformed into a desacralized form of public expression.[1]

Existing scholarship demonstrates that Afro-Cuban cultural knowledge is transmitted through interconnected systems of movement, music, ritual, and embodied participation. Viarnés[3] describes performance as a means of "learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge," arguing that ritual knowledge can become inscribed in the body as "gestural and kinesic memory".[3] Arnedo[5] likewise reveals the importance of cultural context by showing that sacred movements can enter secular performance "devoid of their religious significance." Scholarship on Afro-Cuban music further reinforces the interdependence of these forms: Nodal[6] observes that a skilled batá drummer must command "a multitude of liturgies, rhythms, and dances," while Manuel and Fiol[7] trace how different African-derived musical traditions interacted with one another and with European forms in Cuba. Together, these studies suggest that Afro-Cuban traditions have historically survived not through absolute fixity, but through transmission, interaction, and embodied practice. Building on this scholarship, the present study shifts attention to contemporary instructional spaces, asking how cultural knowledge is maintained when Afro-Cuban movement is taught within diasporic dance classrooms in the United States.

This study investigates how Afro-Cuban dance is both sustained and adapted within instructional spaces across the United States. Drawing on scholarly literature alongside ethnographic participant observation in New York City and Miami during the summer of 2026, the author analyzed how instructors navigate movement transmission within two distinct diasporic centers. Afro-Cuban dance serves as an

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engine of embodied cultural memory precisely when educators transmit physical steps in tandem with rhythm, history, spirituality, symbolism, and communal relationships. When those connections are severed, adaptation devolves into mere decontextualization.

Historical context

Afro-Cuban dance emerged within the brutal matrix of Spanish colonial slavery and the forced transatlantic displacement of Africans to Cuba.[4,6] The cultural practices that formed its historical foundations were reconstructed by Africans held in captivity in Cuba.[6(p.157)] Within Black religious communities, practitioners safeguarded sacred dances, songs, spiritual beliefs, vocabulary, oral traditions, and instruments used in ritual life.[6] Martínez-Echazábal[1] describes the Yoruba tradition as surviving both the "transatlantic journey" and the physical displacement from its original territory. By rebuilding these practices under hostile colonial circumstances, African communities preserved important cultural foundations while adapting them to a new Caribbean reality.

Over time, these reconstructed traditions intersected with other African-derived practices alongside European cultural forms of Spanish origin.[6] Afro-Cuban dance consequently developed through simultaneous processes of continuity, adaptation, and cultural exchange.

African diaspora and transculturation in Cuba

Afro-Cuban culture coalesced through the forced migration and convergence of diverse African ethnic groups in colonial Cuba. Nodal[6] identifies several distinct African populations—including Yoruba, Carabalí, Mandinga, and others—whose drums reverberated through colonial *cabildos*, plantation communities, and feast-day dances.

Among these diverse influences, Yoruba-derived traditions proved especially enduring within Afro-Cuban religious and performance culture. In Cuba, Yoruba people and their language were traditionally known as *Lucumí*.[7(p.47)] Manuel and Fiol[7] further distinguish the Iyesá, descendants of the Ijesha Yoruba, from the Arará, whose ancestors came from the West African kingdoms of Allada, Ouidah, and Dahomey. Central African traditions also shaped Afro-Cuban culture; Manuel and Fiol[7] identify a particularly influential cultural strand derived from Bantu peoples of the west-central Congo River region.

Although the Iyesá and Arará retained distinct rhythms, drums, and songs separate from Lucumí practices, these groups shared significant religious and musical overlaps across Havana and Matanzas.[7] Nodal[6] explains that African cultural elements gradually integrated with Spanish-derived forms through syncretism, contributing to a distinctly Cuban culture. Manuel and Fiol[7] describe the broader process as musical transculturation, through which African-derived traditions interacted both with one another and with European music.

Crucially, transculturation did not signify the erosion of original cultural meanings. Rather, it entailed the strategic preservation, adaptation, and recombination of displaced traditions, producing new Cuban practices while leaving earlier cultural foundations recognizable.[4,7] Ultimately, the survival of these evolving traditions relied on the resilient institutional infrastructure of Afro-Cuban religious communities.

Religion, community, and cultural preservation

One prominent African-derived religious system in Cuba is Regla de Ocha (commonly called Santería or Regla Lucumí), which Manuel and Fiol[7] describe as a Cuban form of interrelated Yoruba practices and beliefs. Orishas are deities within this Yoruba-derived religious system.[7] Its public ceremonies combine songs and batá drumming to praise the Orishas and invite their manifestation through spiritual possession.[7] Cultural transmission also occurred through *cabildos*, mutual-aid societies in Havana and Matanzas where enslaved and free people of color protected elements of Yoruba culture.[7]

Historically, sacred drums were reserved for ritual ceremonies and played by initiated specialists, whereas secular drums accompanied popular forms such as conga, rumba, and son.[6] Within Yoruba-based traditions, each Orisha is represented through an interconnected system of colors, numbers, foods, music, dance postures, and symbols.[4] Dance, therefore, belongs to a larger religious and aesthetic structure rather than functioning as an isolated movement.

Relationship among dance, music, and song

In Cuba and Nigeria, batá drums function both as surrogate speech—mimicking the tones of the Yoruba language—and as rhythmic accompaniment for singing and dancing.[7] This communicative structure also appears in Santería *cantos*, which use a call-and-response pattern between a specialized lead singer and a chorus.[7] During public *toques de santo*, songs are accompanied by batá drums, the *acheré* rattle, and hand clapping, while specific musical sections must be performed in sequence with accompanying choreography.[7]

Nodal similarly explains that a skilled batá drummer must know "a multitude of liturgies, rhythms, and dances".[6] Afro-Cuban performance is therefore best understood as an "orchestration of media" in which movement, music, language, gesture, ritual, and communal participation operate together.[2]

Theoretical framework: dance as embodied cultural memory

Cultural knowledge is not transmitted exclusively through written records or verbal explanation; it is also stored and communicated through movement, rhythm, gesture, repetition, and collective participation.

Performance as embodied knowledge

Drawing on Diana Taylor, Viarnés[3] approaches performance as a system for "learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge" and explains that possession practices rooted in myth make the body a vessel for the transmission of cultural memory. Viarnés notes that rites become inscribed in the body as

"gestural and kinesic memory" (2007). She also discusses the power of repeated ceremonies, in which participants engage memory through habitual bodily behavior.[3(p.131–133)] Memory is not merely recalled intellectually; it is repeatedly practiced and made present.[3(p.131–133)]

Arnedo[2] explains that ritual performance conveys, sustains, and reinforces images of the African past through calendrical, verbal, and gestural repetition. He characterizes Afro-Cuban rituals and secular celebrations as "orchestrations of media" that combine language with nonverbal forms such as music and dance.[2]

Cultural continuity through adaptation

Vega[4(p.45)] explains that *ase* (spiritual energy) appears under different names throughout the African diaspora, maintaining its central importance even as its expressions transform across locations. She notes the Yoruba appreciation of "freshness and improvisation" in the arts and argues that African-based aesthetic practices have demonstrated an ability to improvise while maintaining the foundations of traditional sacred systems.[4(p.49,52)] Cabrera describes the Cuban monte as a sacred landscape in which ancestral divinities remain present, demonstrating the continued relationship between the natural world and African-derived spiritual traditions in Cuba.[10(p.7)] This continuity is also evident in music. Manuel and Fiol observe that Afro-Cuban ritual music preserves modal and melodic features with strong parallels to traditional West African song styles, demonstrating how African-derived aesthetic structures can persist even as they are transformed within Cuba.[7(p.50)]

This continuity extends to musical practice. Afro-Cuban drums developed within changing social environments while remaining deeply connected to African-derived religious, ceremonial, and cultural practices.[6(p.157–160)] Similarly, Afro-Cuban ritual music preserves musical structures with connections to West African traditions, demonstrating how cultural forms can change geographically while retaining important elements of their historical foundations.[7(p.45–50)]

The limits and risks of adaptation

Nevertheless, the adaptation of sacred forms into secular environments carries inherent risks. Arnedo illustrates this shift through the migration of ritual movement into secular *rumba* performance. He observes that dances linked to *Changó, Palo, Makuta*, and *Abakuá* supplied physical gestures that were ultimately "devoid of their religious significance," rendering their physical execution "performative rather than representational".[5]

A parallel concern is structural homogenization. Martínez-Echazábal cautions against placing distinct African-derived religious practices under the umbrella term "Afro-Cuban religion" as if they formed a "homogeneous, monolithic entity," because doing so can erase the unique and complex qualities of each tradition.[1(p.16)]

However, formal dance institutions can also serve an important role in cultural preservation and transmission. White-Dixon describes Black Philadelphia dance schools and cultural arts institutions as spaces that preserved and promoted African American cultural traditions while creating training environments for successive generations of Black dancers and educators.[16(p.25)] The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater similarly demonstrates how formal dance institutions can transmit cultural memory through concert performance, with choreography, music, movement, and performance practices encoding aspects of African American cultural experience.[12] Dance institutions can also preserve culture through adaptation rather than strict replication; DeFrantz describes the Ailey company's repertory as bringing disparate dance techniques and histories together while maintaining recognizable cultural and aesthetic connections.[12(p.660)]

Katherine Dunham's combination of anthropological fieldwork and choreography demonstrates another model for cultural transmission, in which studying dance within its original cultural context allowed diasporic movement to be represented with greater historical and cultural specificity.[13(p.449–450)] Dunham's performances further illustrate how material encountered through research and fieldwork could be reworked for the concert stage while remaining connected to broader questions of Black cultural representation.[14(p.121–122)]

At the same time, adaptation outside Cuba does not necessarily mean cultural disappearance. McPherson's study of Afro-Cuban religions in Chicago demonstrates how these traditions entered multiethnic and transnational communities involving African Americans, Afro-Latinos, and Latinos, illustrating how Afro-Cuban religious practices could continue in new diasporic environments while interacting with different communities.[15(p.127,133)]

Analyzing post-revolutionary Cuban cultural policy, Martínez-Echazábal[1] shows how ancestral Yoruba songs and dances were systematically popularized and aestheticized for stage presentation. She contends that this institutional staging reduced integrated, living social practices to "exotic fragments for touristic and popular consumption," recasting sacred experience into "desacralized forms of popular expression".[1] Ultimately, these three dynamics operate in tandem: decontextualization preserves superficial choreography while severing relational context; homogenization flattens lineage distinctions; and commercialization often prioritizes spectacle over cultural meaning.

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Ultimately, these dynamics demonstrate that institutionalization and adaptation can have different consequences depending on context: decontextualization may preserve superficial choreography while severing relational context; homogenization can flatten lineage distinctions; commercialization may prioritize spectacle over cultural meaning; yet community-based institutions can also provide spaces through which cultural knowledge is taught and sustained.

Research Methodology and Positionality

Research methods

This study combines scholarly research with ethnographic participant observation conducted in Afro-Cuban dance classes in New York City and Miami during the summer of 2026. The author recorded field notes following each class, documenting movement patterns, musical structures, teaching methods, verbal explanations, and forms of participation among dancers and musicians. These observations were then compared with scholarly accounts of Afro-Cuban religion, music, cultural memory, and diasporic transmission.

Participant-observer position

Through participant observation, the author experienced how rhythm directed movement, how repetition built bodily familiarity, and how an instructor's historical explanation changed the way a gesture was executed.

The author's prior dance training in ballet and contemporary dance influenced her understanding of unfamiliar movement. While technical training helped in the analysis of posture, rhythm, and weight distribution, it also brought the risk of imposing Western concert-dance standards onto traditions governed by different cultural principles. Therefore, the author carefully distinguished between direct observation, the explicit explanations of instructors, and interpretation through scholarly research.

The author also entered these studios as a student observer rather than as an initiated practitioner or long-standing member of the communities represented.

Ethical and interpretive limits

Certain dimensions of religious knowledge are transmitted only through initiation, long-term participation, or relationships of trust within a community. When an instructor did not explain the spiritual meaning of a movement, the author avoided assigning one solely based on visual appearance.

Additionally, the study does not treat New York City and Miami as representative of every Afro-Cuban community in the United States, as Afro-Cuban traditions have also developed within distinct multi-ethnic communities in cities such as Chicago.[15(p.133)] Each observation reflects a specific instructor, institution, class format, studio setting, and group of students. Rather than making broad generalizations, this fieldwork offers two comparative case studies to examine a focused question: how cultural knowledge is preserved, adapted, or decontextualized when Afro-Cuban dance is taught in public U.S. studio spaces.

Afro-Cuban Dance in New York City

Fieldwork settings and scope

The New York City fieldwork took place across several educational settings during June 2026. At the Teranga Conference at Ailey Studios, the author attended lectures on cultural lineage and dance pedagogy and participated in a West African dance workshop led by Maguette Camara. On June 24, she attended an Afro-Cuban class taught by Jinae Suire at World Arts East. Four days later, she participated in a modern Cuban dance class taught by Noibis Licea at Ailey Studios. Together, these experiences revealed several ways in which African and Afro-Caribbean movement traditions are transmitted within New York City's diverse institutional dance environment.

Not all of the material taught at the Teranga Conference was strictly Afro-Cuban. Camara's workshop, for example, centered on West African movement and traditions from Guinea. Nevertheless, these experiences provided a vital diasporic framework for interpreting the Afro-Cuban classes. They demonstrated pedagogical principles—including live musical exchange, communal participation, respect for cultural lineage, and embodied learning. Maintaining the distinctions among these traditions is essential, as comparison can reveal shared diasporic concerns without treating culturally specific forms as interchangeable.

Cultural lineage and dance pedagogy at the Teranga Conference

The lectures at the Teranga Conference framed cultural transmission as an educational responsibility. Allan Rocero Gitanes examined the relationship between movement, institutional lineage, and decolonizing pedagogy through discussions of Horton and Dunham techniques. In the field notes from Gitanes's June 13, 2026 lecture at the Teranga Conference, the author documented him asking, "How do we teach students to carry culture in their bodies?," arguing that a classroom could function either as "a sanctuary" or as "a site of assimilation." His questions shifted the purpose of dance education away from technical replication alone. The teaching of movement without its history assimilates culturally specific practices into a generic dance vocabulary; teaching lineage and context alongside technique makes the classroom a site of cultural preservation.

Careitha Davis further emphasized the responsibility to acknowledge the people and communities behind the traditions. In the field notes from Davis's lecture at the Teranga Conference, the author recorded how she began with photographs of influential figures in dance history, drawing attention to how easily choreographic legacies can be separated from the individuals who created and transmitted them. Discussing Katherine Dunham and Afro-Caribbean performance, Davis presented movement, music, costume, ritual, and gesture as interconnected carriers of historical and spiritual meaning.

One performance Davis discussed used a dancer's flowing skirt to symbolize resistance to political and social oppression, showing that cultural meaning is communicated through objects as well as choreography. Davis also reinterpreted familiar performance conventions through observed Afro-diasporic practices: rather than viewing a bow simply as asking for applause, she described low head inclinations as gestures of gratitude toward ancestors and elders. Even the removal of costumes and makeup after a performance could

continue this process of remembrance. In this framework, performance did not end when the choreography concluded; it remained part of an ongoing relationship with those who had transmitted the tradition, including the dancers.

These lectures reinforced the concept of performance as embodied cultural memory. Cultural preservation depended not simply on retaining recognizable movement, but also on teaching who created it, what histories it carried, and toward whom its gestures were directed.

Rhythm and community in Maguette Camara's West African Workshop

The following day, the author participated in Maguette Camara's West African dance workshop accompanied by live percussion, including the *djembe, dunun, kenkeni*, and *sangban*. Some drums were played with bare hands, while others required sticks; their differing sounds combined to form a layered rhythmic structure. Dancers and musicians alike shared the physical intensity. In the field notes from Camara's workshop, the author recorded how drummers adjusted their hand placement and the force of each strike to match the dancers' energy, while the dancers responded to the evolving rhythms.

The spatial arrangement reinforced this connection: instead of facing the mirrors, combinations were directed toward the drummers. This simple shift pivoted focus from self-critical reflection to an active dialogue with the musicians. The drummers were not background accompaniment, nor were people dancing over a static beat. Together, people inhabited a shared framework where rhythm translated directly into movement.

Camara also connected movement to natural imagery, using sweeping arm gestures to evoke wind and other environmental forces. In the field notes, the author described the studio's Marley floor as seeming to turn to soil and the enclosed room as opening into wind and mountains.

The workshop concluded in a circle. Participants entered the center individually while the rest of the group encouraged their movement; afterward, the class moved together and thanked each drummer by lowering their heads and reaching a hand toward the floor. The circle replaced the front-facing orientation common to many concert-dance classes with a communal structure in which participants watched, supported, and acknowledged one another. Although Camara's workshop represented a West African rather than an Afro-Cuban tradition, it provided an important comparison: cultural knowledge was transmitted through spatial organization, musical exchange, gratitude, and collective participation, as well as through the movement combinations themselves.

Orisha movement at World Arts East

On June 24, the author attended an Afro-Cuban class taught by Jinae Suire at World Arts East. Suire opened by explaining that dancers and musicians work together as joint storytellers, functioning cohesively as one. Throughout the session, the drummers sang while playing, and students learned movement in direct relationship to their rhythms. Music was not merely introduced after the choreography as accompaniment; it was part of the structure through which students learned timing, energy, expression, and intention.

The class centered on dances for the *Orishas*. In one sequence, Suire connected sweeping arms and rapid turns to *Oyá* and to the forces of wind, storms, and tornadoes. Her explanation transformed how we performed the movement. The gestures were no longer just fast or athletic, but intentional expressions of natural forces.

Another section focused on *Ogún*, incorporating grounded, heavy movements and gestures mimicking the clearing of paths with a machete, highlighting the importance of labor, protection, and warrior qualities. Suire instructed students to maintain serious facial expressions, emphasizing that visual focus carries cultural meaning in the dance. This direction demonstrated the difference between reproducing the outline of a gesture and embodying the qualities attached to it. Movement, expression, imagined objects, and spiritual symbolism worked together rather than operating as separate theatrical additions.

The class ended communally. Participants first stood in a circle, then sat to stretch, and finally lay silently on the floor while reflecting on their connection to the earth. This conclusion should not automatically be classified as a complete religious ritual, particularly from the perspective of an uninitiated participant. Nevertheless, its structure reinforced themes that had shaped the class: connection to nature, collective participation, and movement as more than physical exercise.

Suire's teaching illustrates how a public New York classroom can adapt Orisha-related movement without presenting it solely as choreography. The institutional setting, time constraints, and diverse student population necessarily altered the original context of transmission. Yet movement remained connected to live percussion, singing, spiritual figures, natural forces, facial expression, and communal reflection.

Adaptation in modern Cuban dance

The June 28 class with Noibis Licea at Ailey Studios offered a different model of cultural transmission, blending Afro-Cuban movement with modern dance frameworks rather than just religious ones. The class began with closed eyes, concentrated breathing, and instrumental music, establishing a grounded physical focus before movement began. Licea then combined Afro-Cuban movement qualities with Graham-based principles, arabesques, floorwork, turns, and traveling combinations.

This adaptation demonstrated that transformation does not necessarily require abandoning cultural foundations. The author found intricate footwork and turns enjoyable, yet a seemingly simple forward walk with coordinated hip movement proved far more difficult. The author's prior training in dance helped in controlling and stabilizing certain areas of her body; Licea's movement required a different organization of the pelvis, torso, rhythm, and weight. It called for reconsidering how the body could generate and respond to movement.

Spanish terminology also appeared throughout the class, as Licea introduced students to Makuta movement. In a later combination set to a song repeating *gallina*, or "chicken," students embodied the animal's qualities through playful gesture and characterization. The combination demonstrated how imagery and humor could support physical understanding.

Afro-Cuban Dance in Miami

Fieldwork setting

The Miami fieldwork centered on Afro-Cuban dance classes taught by Marisol Blanco at the Koubek Center in Little Havana. On July 7 and July 9, 2026, the author participated in *Baila! Little Havana*, a Cuban folkloric dance class in which movement instruction was consistently accompanied by explanations of history, rhythm, labor, spirituality, and symbolism. Unlike the broader diasporic setting of the New York City fieldwork, Blanco's pedagogy centered specifically on the transmission of Cuban cultural knowledge.

Blanco did not structure the classes around choreography alone. Instead, instruction moved continuously between explanation and embodiment/execution: students learned where a dance came from, listened for its rhythmic structure, practiced its steps, and encountered the stories or cultural practices associated with those movements.

The HPS method: history, percussion, and step/-song

Blanco operationalizes this framework through the HPS Method: History, Percussion, and Step/Song.[8] This structural hierarchy is deliberate; physical technique represents only a single dimension of the methodology. History anchors the sociohistorical conditions that birthed the dance; Percussion provides the foundational rhythmic matrix for bodily movement; and Steps and Songs engage students in both physical and vocal performance of the tradition.

Consequently, the HPS Method actively resists instructional models centered solely on visual imitation. During the July 7 class, Blanco continuously interspersed physical execution with contextual commentary, connecting movement to music, work, and everyday Cuban experience.

Labor as embodied cultural memory

The relationship between movement and cultural history was especially clear in *Pilón* and *Molienda de Café*. In class, Blanco connected these dances to physical actions associated with labor, particularly the pounding, grinding, and processing of agricultural products.

This process was particularly evident in *Molienda de Café*. Blanco taught a recurring footwork pattern through the sounds "kah" and "chang." On the "kah," the author slid the active foot outward and slightly backward while maintaining contact with the floor. On the "chang," weight was transferred into the sliding foot as the hip settled with the rhythm. What looked like simple footwork required precise control of weight, timing, hips, and contact with the ground. The rhythm had to be transferred into the placement of the feet, the shifting of the weight, and the response of the pelvis and torso.

Nature, objects, and symbolic movement

The July 9 class shifted the emphasis from histories of labor toward nature, cleansing, and collective participation. A guest teacher conducted much of the instruction in Spanish, and the class incorporated handkerchiefs, fresh leaves, and branches gathered from trees surrounding the Koubek Center. Dancers performed sweeping gestures with their arms, mimicking the movement of leaves, branches, and processes of cleansing. Blanco and the guest instructor associated the sweeping actions with cleansing that extended beyond physical cleanliness to the body, mind, and spirit.

Language, percussion, and collective participation

Because much of the instruction was delivered in Spanish, demonstration, rhythm, repetition, facial expression, objects, and collective response provided essential extra layers of communication. The guest instructor established rhythms with wooden sticks (*claves*) before recorded music played, requiring participants to respond vocally while moving together with dancers occasionally lifting their skirts as part of the sequence.

The partial language barrier highlighted both the possibilities and limitations of embodied transmission. Movement allowed the author to participate before achieving complete verbal understanding, yet physical participation could not render explanation unnecessary. While demonstration showed *how* to perform an action, verbal and historical context clarified *why* that action mattered. The synthesis of both was far more culturally informative than either in isolation.

New York City and Miami: Two Models of Diasporic Transmission

The New York City experiences placed Afro-Cuban dance within a broader network of West African and Caribbean diasporic traditions, while Marisol Blanco's Miami classes concentrated on connecting Cuban folkloric movement to particular histories, rhythms, songs, and social practices.

Shared principles of transmission

Despite differences in setting and teaching style, the New York City and Miami classes prioritized the relationship between dancers and live music. In Jinae Suire's New York City class, drummers sang while playing, and students were taught to view dancers and musicians as participants in a single structure. At the Teranga Conference, Maguette Camara likewise directed dancers toward the musicians rather than toward a mirror. In Miami, Blanco's HPS Method placed percussion alongside history and step/song as a fundamental component of instruction. Across these settings, music did not simply accompany choreography after movement had

been learned; rhythm helped organize how movement was understood and physically executed.

This relationship reflected[2(p.994)] characterization of Afro-Cuban performance as an "orchestration of media" involving interconnected verbal and nonverbal forms, including music and dance. Students learned through listening, watching, repeating, singing, responding to percussion, and moving collectively.

Communal participation formed another point of continuity. Both the Camara workshop in New York and Suire's class concluded in circular formations, while the Miami classes incorporated collective rhythm, vocal response, and repeated movement. These structures shifted the emphasis away from dance as an exclusively individual display.

Differences in pedagogy and emphasis

Blanco's Miami pedagogy was systematically grounded in the cultural contexts of specific Cuban dance forms. Her HPS Method (History, Percussion, and Step/Song) embedded contextual knowledge directly into the instructional sequence.

Where the New York workshops prioritized relational connection, linking dancers to drummers, movement to nature, and contemporary students to diasporic lineages, the Miami curriculum emphasized contextual reconstruction. In Miami, instruction systematically identified the historical roots of a movement and established its rhythmic foundation before guiding students toward physical embodiment.

The role of place

In New York City, the author's fieldwork shifted between World Arts East and Ailey Studios, where Afro-Cuban material intersected with West African, Afro-Caribbean, modern, and other diasporic practices.

While this institutional proximity invited comparative analysis, it equally demanded attention to cultural specificity. As Martínez-Echazábal,[1(p.16)] cautions, collapsing distinct African-derived practices into a "homogeneous, monolithic entity" risks erasing their specific historical and stylistic nuances. Shared elements such as polyrhythmic structures, communal participation, or embodied pedagogies can highlight historical ties without rendering Yoruba-derived, Guinean, and Cuban traditions interchangeable.

By contrast, the author's Miami fieldwork generated a distinct relationship to geographic and cultural places. Blanco's classes at the Koubek Center in Little Havana explicitly privileged Cuban folkloric dance, embedding Cuban history and terminology as central, constant components of instruction. Ultimately, place determined not whether cultural preservation occurred, but rather the pedagogical framework through which it was mediated.

Preservation of movement versus preservation of meaning

Ultimately, comparing the New York City and Miami sites clarified the vital distinction between preserving movement and preserving meaning. Arnedo illustrates this divide historically: as movements and gestures shifted from Afro-Cuban ritual dances into secular rumba, certain forms became "devoid of their religious significance," rendering their physicality "performative rather than representational".[5,p.30] The outer physical form persisted even as its connection to a sacred worldview evolved.

The author's fieldwork indicated that instructors actively resisted this desacralization by embedding movement within its broader relational network. In New York City, Suire connected movement gestures to Orishas, natural forces, live percussion, expressive agency, and communal participation. In Miami, Blanco linked movement steps directly to history, labor, percussion, song, and symbolism. Although neither environment could fully reconstruct the original social or sacred contexts of these practices, contextual grounding ensured that students received far more than a physical template to imitate.

In a similar vein, Vega,[4(p.52)] characterized African diasporic traditions as inherently adaptive and improvisational systems that nevertheless preserve foundational frameworks of meaning. Within this paradigm, preservation allowed for adaptation, provided that structural shifts did not detach a practice from the web of cultural relationships that rendered it intelligible.

Finally, Martínez-Echazábal's warning against reducing living practices to "exotic fragments" through public performance highlighted why physical visibility alone cannot be equated with genuine cultural preservation.[1]

Historical Case Study: Katherine Dunham

Ethnographic research and choreography

Dunham's fieldwork spanned Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, and Haiti, although Haiti proved particularly transformative for her understanding of African diasporic culture.[9] As Das[9] notes, Dunham analyzed dance as an integral element of a "larger Haitian social structure," situating movement within its surrounding religious and social environments rather than isolating it as a purely physical vocabulary. In a similar vein, Vega[4] highlighted Dunham as a key artist who immersed herself in African diasporic traditions, explicitly grounding her creative work in rigorous ethnographic research.

Translation to the concert stage

By 1940, as Das[9] explains, Dunham had formalized a methodology of "fusion," synthesizing her classical ballet and modern-dance training with Afro-Caribbean movement forms.

Yet this theatrical translation inevitably revealed the tensions inherent in adaptation. Moreno Vega highlights Dunham's *Shango Suite* as a prime example—a stage translation of a sacred *bembé* that synthesized ritual practices from Cuba, Haiti, and Trinidad. While the performance incorporated iconography that retained sacred resonance for initiated or culturally knowledgeable audiences, secular

spectators often consumed these same symbols merely as aesthetic elements of theatrical staging.[4]

Furthermore, Das points to a fundamental tension in codifying movement traditions grounded in improvisation. Institutionalizing and extracting vernacular forms from the communal environments that sustained them, she argues, risks diluting their radical political and collective efficacy.[9]

Teaching and transmission

Dunham also institutionalized her approach through education, opening the Katherine Dunham School of Dance in Manhattan in 1944 to train future generations of performers and choreographers.[9] The influence of Dunham's pedagogical legacy extended beyond her own school, as Black dance educators in Philadelphia trained at the Dunham School, brought Dunham dancers into their own institutions as teachers, and promoted Dunham technique as an essential part of dance education.[16(p.25)]

Cultural Visibility, Commercialization, and Misrepresentation

Visibility and commercialization

Nodal details how international record labels capitalized on European and North American demand for Afro-Cuban rhythms, circulating them globally in forms he characterizes as distorted and "vulgarly commercialized".[6] Although Afro-Cuban instrumentation gained access to commercial venues worldwide, market demands selectively dictated which elements of these traditions were preserved and presented.[6]

Martínez-Echazábal identifies this contradiction in public presentations of African-derived religion in Cuba. She demonstrates how living sacred practices were frequently reconfigured into historical artifacts and aesthetic spectacles for public consumption, even as contemporary religious practice remained marginalized. In this commodification process, holistic cultural traditions risked being reduced to "exotic fragments for touristic and popular consumption".[1] Ultimately, she argues, this secularization converted Afro-Cuban religious traditions into "desacralized forms of popular expression" that were rendered legible, economically valuable, and politically permissible.[1]

Misreading movement

Arnedo demonstrates that distinguishing sacred from secular movement presents a key challenge for outside observers, as rumba frequently incorporates choreographic references to Orishas without enacting their accompanying ritual functions.[5] He points to one notable account in which observers misread rumba dancers as undergoing spiritual possession, projecting a sacred experience onto a performance where none occurred.[5]

Recognizing these boundaries as a participant-observer, the author deliberately refrained from projecting sacred meaning onto movement gestures beyond what instructors explicitly communicated in class.

Responsibility in cultural transmission

Ultimately, responsible cultural transmission requires neither static preservation nor the artificial replication of sacred contexts within public settings. Instead, it demands an explicit acknowledgment of historical transformation, the precise contextualization of cultural origins, and an active refusal to present an adapted fragment as a whole tradition.[4]

Conclusion

This study examined how Afro-Cuban dance is preserved and adapted within contemporary instructional spaces through scholarly research and participant observation in New York City and Miami. Across both locations, the central finding was that cultural preservation depends not simply on maintaining the physical form of a movement, but on transmitting the knowledge that gives that movement meaning. Rhythm, history, spirituality, symbolism, music, labor, and communal participation remained essential to understanding the movement vocabulary the author encountered. The fieldwork, therefore, revealed an important distinction between adaptation and decontextualization: movement can change while remaining connected to its cultural lineage, whereas movement reproduced without its surrounding knowledge may retain its appearance while losing much of its meaning.

The differences between New York City and Miami further demonstrated that cultural transmission is shaped by place. In New York City, Afro-Cuban movement existed within a broader network of African diasporic dance practices, emphasizing connections among traditions. In Miami, instruction more explicitly connected movement to Cuban history, spirituality, folkloric practices, and everyday life. Despite these differences, instructors in both locations demonstrated that teaching movement also functioned as a means of transmitting cultural memory.

The author applied these findings to her culminating choreography set to Ibeyi's *River*. Within a contemporary choreographic structure, the author incorporated movement vocabulary associated with Oyá and Ogún while remaining conscious of the histories, symbolism, and cultural meanings learned through her research. This process reinforced the central conclusion of the study: responsible adaptation requires more than borrowing the physical appearance of culturally specific movement. It requires understanding and acknowledging the knowledge carried within it.

Ultimately, cultural continuity does not require cultural immobility. Afro-Cuban dance can evolve across geographic locations, generations, classrooms, and artistic forms while continuing to transmit cultural memory. Preservation, therefore, is not merely the reproduction of physical mechanics; it is the continuation of relationships between movement and history, body and memory, and practitioner and community. To preserve a dance is not only to sustain how it moves but also to honor what and whom it carries forward.

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About the Author

Summer Park is a senior at Harvard-Westlake School in Los Angeles with interests in language, culture, dance, and cross-cultural research. She is fluent in Korean and Spanish and has studied Italian at the beginner level. An avid traveler, she has visited more than ten countries and enjoys learning about different cultures through food and dance.

Summer is also a passionate dancer and choreographer. She has trained in ballet since the age of three and has explored a wide range of dance traditions and styles, including contemporary, modern, Korean traditional fan dancing, jazz, hip-hop, West African dance, Afro-Cuban dance, and rumba. Her interest in movement extends beyond performance to choreography, cultural research, and the ways dance can preserve and communicate history and identity.

During the summer of 2026, Summer received a Junior Fellowship to investigate the preservation and adaptation of Afro-Cuban dance traditions. Her research took her to New York City and Miami, where she studied Afro-Cuban dance through classes, fieldwork, and cultural research. The fellowship culminated in this research paper and an original contemporary dance incorporating Afro-Cuban movement vocabulary.