The Rhythms of Life
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Winter 2020 Issue

Afro-Cuban dance is part of a rich and meaningful spiritual tradition.

Why do you dance? Because you love it! To compose, to perform, express yourself. In the Afro-Cuban brothertic tradition, dance is so deeply entwined with music, storytelling, and religion that almost everyone does it, and there’s almost always a reason to be dancing.

In life, there are so many celebrations to dance about,” says Nichole Lesne, an NYC-based dancer and choreographer from Havana. Cuba, who graduated from the National School of Arts in Havana. “Dances, prayers for specific occasions like the birth of someone going through surgery, protection from unknown problems—they are dances for all these occasions and situations.” And many of these dances are all still practiced today, in Cuba and in communities around the US.

MOVING BY THE SPIRITS
Most movement in the Afro-Cuban dance tradition comes out of the African religion known as Yoruba, which West Africans continued to practice in Cuba after they were enslaved and forced to work on the island. Practitioners of Yoruba believe that there are many different expressions of God called orichas. Each oricha symbolizes a different part of life or the world, and each has a characteristic movement style and “personality” or role.

“You use your body to indicate what is powerful about that oricha,” explains Rosario Roberts, a professor of dance at Connecticut College who specializes in African Diasporic dance. For example, Ochun is the deity of sweet waters, beauty, love, and fertility (among other virtues and Afros). Performing her dance, Roberts says, involves manipulating a flowing skirt while wringing the hands and upper body in the way water moves. Other main orichas to whom Yoruba believers pray by dancing are: Ona (representing peace and wisdom), and Oshun (a female warrior who whips a horse’s tail to bring about change).

GETTING TECHNICAL
Dance is much of the African dance across the world. “Bomba de la danza cubana (Ecuadorian modern dance technique), which was created to be taught at the National School of the Arts starting in 1947, is designed to erase differences between Afro-Cuban dance and Afro-Cuban traditions,” Lesne says. And it’s not just modern: “Afro-Cuban rapid transitions and the tambor can be seen in all other forms of social dance: hiphop, rumba, merengue, cha-cha-cha, and salsa,” Roberts says.

Afro-Cuban dance is still relevant today. “You can see a video recently of a popular song that talks about the different orichas,” Roberts says. “There’s a lot of history between the dances and real life because these spiritual and religious traditions are so much a part of Cuba’s daily life.”