

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

BERRY, MAYA J. 2025. *Defending Rumba in Havana: The Sacred and Black Corporeal Undercommons*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 311 pg., ISBN 9781478031338

Outsiders to Rumba may mistakenly view the art form as just one of a number of dances with Afro-Latin historical origins. Western images of Rumba tend to portray the dance with images of sweaty bodies displaying forms of rhythm and sexuality. Dances are reduced to exotic displays of tropical escapism. However, Rumba is far more complex. It is an art form that speaks to issues such as agency, power and gender. It is a powerful spiritual tool communicating narratives of social rebellion in the face of colonialism. It is empowering as it enables discussions and displays related to race, gender, and social roles.

Rumba is far more than Hollywood depictions and tourist displays. In *Defending Rumba in Havana: The Sacred and Black Corporeal Undercommons* author Maya J. Berry takes readers into the etic physical realm of Rumba in Havana Cuba while leading us on the journey to the emic where we learn of the significance of Rumba as a conduit of the human experience.

Berry opens the book with some fundamental information about Rumba. In 2016 UNESCO nominated Cuban Rumba as an intangible cultural heritage. While this is an important recognition, Berry shares that Rumberos claim to be heirs to enslaved and African diaspora co-presences. It is an artform that serves as a symbol against capitalism and racial discrimination. The author explains that the use of the terms 'Black Corporeal Undercommons' refers to a Black geography grounded by the spiritual maneuvers of everyday Black people. The term 'under' is used to allude to outsider perceptions of Rumba and Rumberos as 'under' respectabilities. The term 'under' is also a term that was used by Cuban criminologist Fernando Ortiz in his early writings on Afro-Latin spiritual traditions. Some of these traditions such as the Abakuá societies that came from the Efik and Ekpe people of the Cross River region of Africa began to appear on the radar of local colonialists in Cuba. Local perceptions painted many African traditional activities and practices as 'witchcraft'

and practices reserved for the criminal underworld. Ortiz would write of Rumba as being obscene and savage.

As Berry describes, Rumba gained a reputation for being a cultural symbol of revolutionary values of integration and egalitarianism. Rumba began to appear in the *cabildos*, gathering places for African communities set up by colonialists. The opening chapter 'Black Inclusion, Black Enclosure' begins with the *cabildos* that were established in order to avoid slave rebellions. *Cabildos* for the Lucumi (Yoruba), Congo (Ki-Kongo Speaking) and the Carabali (Efik) communities served in providing mutual aid for their communities. The importance of Rumba to many of these communities, Berry explains, is that it pertains to connections to human and divine forces as well ancestral wisdom. Early displays of African dances in the 1800's were considered by colonialists as savage and offensive. However, Rumba began to appear in the public eye in the 1930's when there was a move to appropriate Black popular cultures for nationalists goals. White middle-class performers began doing a style of Rumba that had little resemblance to Rumba among the Black working class. However, Rumba began to become associated with *Abakuá* societies which led to the state targeting of practices as 'anti-social.' Rumba would find itself becoming more intertwined with the many African based spiritual traditions in Cuba as sacred songs and chants to Yoruba deities would be performed with Rumba *clave*, a specific rhythmic pattern used in the dance.

The second chapter 'Black Feminist Aptitudes' begins with some historical explorations into Rumba and colonialism. The Yumba, a Congo inspired Rumba is mentioned for its stance against colonialism. The formation of choirs related to the Rumba variant known as Guaguanco came from the *Cabildo* based mutual aid societies. The Guaguanco Rumba is noted for its inclusion of a dance that features themes of fertility. Berry shares that many of the female postures in Rumba paralleled the social positions of women in Cuban society. The performance of the Guaguanco tells a story of a woman being pursued by a man who wishes to 'vaccinate' her sexually. Through an anthropological lens, Berry shares that the movement and placement of the body in specific spaces in the Rumba produces a specific social meaning. She notes that historically, *Rumberos* posed a challenge to the white middle class standards of femininity and respectability.

Berry encourages readers to see the role that Rumba plays in speaking of issues tied to the sexual economy in slavery. The author takes a focus through Black Feminism in looking at aspects of

bodies being appraised as sexual and cultural commodities. Rumba becomes a stage in which Black working class women give themselves value while sadly expressing the theme that they may be consumed rather than heard from. In the 1930's and 1950's Rumba became a tool used by white Cuban writers to recruit or 'discover' dancers as sexual toys. In the 1960's Rumba became a tool of the state as revolutionary leaders would speak of rescuing Black women from promiscuity and prostitution. By the 1990's Rumba became a tourist attraction for the state.

During Berry's journey into several important cultural and historical points necessary to understand the complexity of Rumba, she also shares her story and personal experiences as a dancer in Cuba. She shares testimonies of dancers who still fight sexual advances from those that look upon women in Rumba as sexual objects. She shares important personal insights into the role that Rumba plays in empowering women to metaphorically halt masculine domination as seen in the Guaguanco dance. As the male dancer chases the woman in the dance, it is the woman that decides to stop or engage advances.

Chapter Three entitled 'Sacred Swagger and It's Social Order' looks at the topic of social order within the context of Rumba. As many Afro-Latin communities such as the Abakuá established their own social orders in spite of the orders set forth by colonialism, so Rumba establishes its own social order. Readers are treated to the history and folklife of the music group Yoruba Andabo.

In Chapter Four, 'Moving Labor across Markets,' the author invites readers to observe how Rumba interacts with Cuban social relations. She looks at how the economy of Cuban religions in contemporary Cuba functions as services for priests, offerings for the deities and Rumba for tourism all serve as components of this economy.

Chapter Five, 'Underworld Assembly,' looks at how Rumba gives agency. The role that Rumba serves in connecting women and co-presences spiritually speaks to a stand against secular constitutions of nations. As some colonists described cabildo dancers as a black cloud over the city, the author speaks of 'reclaiming the Afro-Cuban underworld.' Cabildo dancers were frequently labeled as witchcraft and criminal deviancy. The true activities of cabildo activities were of self-preservation and identity but were marginalized by colonialist propaganda.

Maya J. Berry concludes this journey into Rumba as she describes herself as studying with a Black Feminist interpretive position. This gives readers a crucial vantage point in understanding the gendered and racial narratives found in both the history and performance of the dance.

Defending Rumba in Havana: The Sacred and Black Corporeal Undercommons is a wonderful contribution to the field of anthropology, ethnomusicology, feminist studies and African religious studies.

Tony Kail (BA-Arizona State; MA-Eastern University) has served as an anthropologist in the academic, public and private sectors. He currently teaches undergraduate courses in Cultural Anthropology, Introduction to Anthropology and Contemporary Issues in Anthropology. Today he serves as a curator for the Humboldt Tennessee Historical Museum.



© 2025 Tony Kail