

GRUPO SENSEMAYA

OMAR ALVAREZ, Director and Choreographer

Sensemaya is a Yoruba goddess whose earthly form is a snake. She is a mystical and sensuous creature, identified with those who walk—or dance—close to the ground.

AFRICANS IN CUBA

Africans were first brought to Cuba as slaves in the 1600s. The largest group was the Yoruba, and Yoruba tradition was a main source for Afro-Cuban dance. Another important source was the shared experience of slavery on Cuban soil.

Unlike Africans in the U.S., Cuban slaves lived in very large, often homogeneous groups, in isolated areas. One could always find cultural brothers and sisters to share in religious and social ceremonies. This common culture and the inability of Spanish masters and the Church to suppress it effectively meant that many African traditions survived. Another important factor is that all Cubans share pride in the African heritage and its central place in Cuba's past and present.

THE DANCES

RUMBA

The rumba is a descendant of the West African *calinda*, originally a fertility dance. It was often forbidden by slave masters who found it obscene. Typical instruments are drums, bongos, and *claves* (“*CLAHV-ays*”; polished sticks). A leader or a couple steps forward and calls out a verse, often improvised on a local event or the doings of local people. The other dancers form two lines, and soon another leader or couple steps forward to take the other's place. The popular dance called rumba that reached the U.S. in the 1930s retains none of the original Cuban flavor.

CONGA

The conga is the dance most typical of Carnival and many other public festivities. It is danced in the streets, to the accompaniment of large drums, small snare drums, and the *bombo*, a large wide drum that is strapped to the neck and back. The rhythm of the conga is so catchy that it is said to make the even sick people jump out of their beds to join the line.

EL OGUERE

El Oguere comes directly from the experience of Lucumi (Yoruba) slaves in Cuba. It presents the story of a young slave woman who is raped by a plantation overseer. Fleeing to a runaway slave encampment with the infant daughter born of the rape, she is pursued by the overseer but reaches safety just in time. The slaves drive away the overseer and comfort the terrified child with a lullaby.

EL PALO

El Palo is a battle of wits and physical skill. It arose from the confrontation of two African chiefs on Cuban soil. Rather than fight, the chiefs challenged each other to “argue” the conflict in a battle of magic and flamboyant movements. When this dance is performed today, real weapons are used.

ÑAÑIGO

Ñañiguismo derives from the practices of a secret religious brotherhood that honors Ekue, the god of death in one Nigerian tradition. Ñañigo dance ceremonies eventually made their way to Carnival and were later outlawed by Spanish authorities. Dancers in the roles of priest, scribe, sacrificial animal (a goat), magician, purifier, and executioner act out a drama in honor of Ekue as they bring an initiate into the brotherhood. This dance is associated with private ceremonies and is not always considered socially acceptable.

Performance Contact Information

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Writer's notes: I obtained the information for this program brochure from Mr. Alvarez, who was a student in a vocational training class I directed, and a full-time employee of a dry cleaning plant. It was developed for a specific event, but with the idea that the dance group could use it for other performances over a period of time. There are additional pages with more dance descriptions; the group would simply announce at the beginning of each performance which dances it would perform.