

# Raíces: New Roots, New Routes.

The Puerto Rican Bomba in Transition

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Part One: Raíces proposes a national music.

On the first week of December 2001, the Banco Popular de Puerto Rico released its long awaited TV music special and accompanying CD/DVD compilation to its Puerto Rican audience. These releases have, since 1993, become the bank's most successful community initiatives offering islanders a varied collection of recordings, performances and interviews by established and emerging musical artists. This year's theme titled "Raíces" (Roots) explored the origins of the African-derived Puerto Rican bomba and plena. In a press release Banco Popular Vice President of Public Relations Lourdes Perez-Díaz stated "*this musical special will become a valued collector's item for all of us who appreciate the expressions of humanity and culture that project the essence of our history as a people*".<sup>1</sup> This last phrase "*essence of our history*" suggested the intention of the bank and its producers was to embrace these traditions and to remove any obstacles to its full integration into the collective cultural history of Puerto Rico.

This paper will focus specifically on the treatment of the bomba in Raices. I will present it in two sections: 1. Raices proposes a new national music and 2. Raices: The Production.

The 2001 TV special featured a large cast of traditional bomba players often fronted by "big-name" pop stars drawn from the internationally renowned Puerto Rican music industry. Various artists presented songs and dances featuring different substyles found throughout the island. The location sets ranged from historical sugar plantations and evocative indoor settings to lavish outdoor celebrations interspersed with anecdotal commentary by scholars and music industry insiders.

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<sup>1</sup> Banco Popular de Puerto Rico, press release August 12, 2001.

Many exceptional artists did participate in the project but significant individuals were conspicuously missing from the array of “specialists” that spoke during the programme. The broadcast did not offer these individuals many opportunities to contribute their insights as artists and insiders. This omission raised suspicions about the project and fuelled rumours of an artistic underlying discomfort with the direction of the special.

Raíces instigated a heated cultural dialogue prior to and following its debut. Historians, pop stars, academics, practitioners, and dancers found themselves engaged in discussions about the merits of folkloric revival and/or development. In a short time the bomba community, well on its way to a renaissance, went from being a committed subculture of enthusiasts to a forum on Puerto Rican post-colonial cultural politics. Welmo,<sup>2</sup> the programme’s “hip-hop”<sup>3</sup> host cautioned viewers not to overestimate the value of the special as an authoritative source of factual information and rhythms but rather as a good start to a necessary dialogue about tradition and the modern urban experience.<sup>4</sup> Welmo naively underestimated the lasting power of a strong visual representation produced under the auspices of the country’s largest financial institution. How could the audience not take the offering seriously?

I propose that Raíces became an active agent in the generation of meaning and identity in contemporary Puerto Rican culture. While not considered a direct catalyst for musical development, it did ignite a controversy among practitioners and producers typical of a musical culture demanding its place within a national scene. I also present

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<sup>2</sup> Stage name, complete name is Welmo E. Romero Joseph.

<sup>3</sup> Hip hop criollo is his own term for a recent brand of rapping with strong rhythmic underpinnings of salsa and merengue.

<sup>4</sup> Stone, 2001.

some of the images that precipitated the ensuing dialogue and comment on the impact of this special on perceptions of the bomba among Puerto Rican communities at home and abroad.

Many Puerto Ricans saw Raíces as a catalyst for the bomba, a powerful medium for exposing traditional music. Its juxtaposition of traditional and stylized bomba with flamenco, hip-hop and reggae may have even suggested that the bomba, a product of Ortiz's transculturation, was to be examined as a transnational music.<sup>5</sup> While some viewers believed the production showed disrespect for the traditional bomba,<sup>6</sup> others countered that *any* exposure of the bomba indicated it was time to recognize the contribution of Afro-Puerto Rican culture. Neither side of the argument had any doubts about the long-term impact of the programme.

The Banco Popular, a user-friendly institution responsive to the values of its clientele joined forces with independent director Paloma Suao, some hired consultants and the Fundación Banco Popular; identified an underestimated national market and seized upon an opportune time to release Raíces.

The conceptual development of Raíces began some three years before the production was launched. In 1999 the Banco Popular produced a special titled "*Con la música por dentro*" that featured a segment of traditional bomba featuring Jesús Cepeda and his ensemble. Favourable public reaction to this short segment convinced music director Angel "Cuco" Peña to develop a whole programme around traditional music of

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<sup>5</sup> Author Lise Waxer in her monograph *Situating Salsa* emphasizes that salsa (and by relation its roots of bomba and guaracha) needs to be examined in terms of multiple sites of production that resemble but do not necessarily imply that it is yet transnational, or global". Waxer, 2002 p. 8

<sup>6</sup> The variety of practices and diversity of possible origins make it impossible to establish the definition of a "real" bomba. Mainstream audiences do not agree on the term either.

African heritage.<sup>7</sup> About the same time film director Paloma Suao, who had already directed a previous TV special for the bank, explored programming ideas that emerged from her own fascination with African traditions. Positive feedback convinced both artistic directors to produce a show about the bomba. As production turned towards the concept development, musical consultants were dispatched around the island to enlist possible groups willing to participate and/or speak on camera. The director, Ms. Suao, immersed herself into the bomba by taking dance classes, attending festivals and acquiring an inside perspective she felt necessary to a respectful treatment of the subject.

Beginning with this pre-production stage, the consultants and producers encountered resistance from traditional players who felt that their work would be trivialized by some of the proposed production concepts; others refused to perform without their traditional singers (who were seen by the producers as not quite as TV-marketable as some of their chosen pop stars); yet others resisted having their dance styles represented in alternative or theatricalized forms. Artists expressed their displeasure at being offered an embarrassingly small fraction of the fees that were going to the pop stars, especially given that these stars had no previous experience with the bomba. An added irritant came in the form of complex contracts in which artists were being asked to accede broadcast rights to the production company in exchange for the modest fees and the TV exposure. The producers negotiated, persevered and premiered the special the first week of December 2001.

The Banco Popular, aware of feedback about the sterile presentations of previous musical specials, responded by providing impressive locations and sophisticated multi-camera scenes. Digital art illustrations and computer-generated animation employed in

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<sup>7</sup> Jesús Cepeda, interview July 2004.

the credits and accompanying booklet were of a quality not previously seen even in Banco Popular productions. The performances were some of the best the genre had to offer.

## **Part Two: The Production**

Public reaction embraced Raíces as an attractive production of real and imagined elements of folklore held together by a thin narrative hosted by a relatively unknown (even in Puerto Rico) Spanish-speaking rapper named Welmo. Raíces, the programme about roots, achieved its broadcast goals but failed to give a voice to those very men and women who still struggle to nurture its diversity and maintain its relevance.

By December 2001 the San Juan metropolitan area was experiencing a steep escalation of participatory bomba activity, festival presentations and healthy enrolment in dance/drumming classes. The bomba had finally captured the national imagination and achieved a level of mainstream interest greater than any previously known period, especially among youth. Y people raised on a musical diet of hip-hop, reggae, Latino pop and rock was unable to resist the lure of the bomba, a music whose practice embraced and encouraged their participation. Given that modern multi-racial Puerto Rican society could seldom claim clear hereditary racial lineage, the bomba slowly but relentlessly insinuated itself into the collective identity of a new generation and rapidly became a symbol of affirmation and national pride.

From a marketing perspective, the Banco Popular's timing for the release of the TV special was ideal considering the excitement of the time. From a musical perspective, however, their venture was not without risk. The manner of presentation, the unorthodox juxtapositions and the mix with other music such as hip-hop and reggae all added up to

an artistic license that could potentially backfire. The producers were confident the pop stars contracted to sing the bombas would be well received even though the repertoire was, musically speaking, quite foreign to them. The producer saw the most controversial aspects of the programme to be the manner in which they were to deal with a musical style many Puerto Ricans did not really identify with.

Risky undertakings of this scope, especially under the auspices of a traditionally conservative institution such as a bank, depend on the commitment of dedicated individuals willing to defend their vision within a larger culture of profit and economic growth. The producers of Raíces bravely chose to highlight a marginalized community that had for the past forty-five years been working to reaffirm a music seriously threatened with extinction. This raised the possibility that the programme might have to defend a strong anti-racist line and even risk the ire of a segment of the Puerto Rican public that continues to see bomba as a lesser musical form associated with poorer and less-refined blacks. Underlying issues of racism, identity, and the prevailing myth of racial harmony were acknowledged and debated privately by the producers and the foundation that oversaw the project. According to CEO of the Bank Foundation, Carmen Lidín, “the final consensus favoured moving ahead and presenting a TV special that celebrated the bomba as a truly national music worthy of admiration of all Puerto Ricans.”<sup>8</sup>

The production of Raíces raised bomba performance from community and festival standards to a high professional quality. It set new standard for production value and projected a message that the bomba was poised to assume its musical relevance with a renewed vigour and vastly improved capacity This transformation required a more

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<sup>8</sup> Carmen Lidín, Executive Director Fundación Banco Popular, interview July 2004.

standardized set of images, costumes, lighting and sound that had been out of reach to most bomba practitioners. TV production standards required a more cohesive approach to starting and ending songs, proper tuning of voices and choruses and a consistent performance of works in order to capture several versions of the same work to be edited later. As expected, the reaction to these demands varied widely within the community. Some groups embraced the higher production standards, citing their own displeasure with the often careless or much too casual presentations of traditional bomba that passed for authentic. Other groups were uncomfortable with the rigidity of the shooting schedules and the non-traditional combination of artists and styles.

Raíces posed a new challenge for bomba players and dancers in that its popularity and, more importantly, its sales abroad, could potentially reinforce an image of professionalism and production value that is not to be found in regular practice on the island. This concern was expressed to me by no small number of bomba enthusiasts. Furthermore, there was and continues to exist a fear among some bomba practitioners that the images of the DVD/Video will become the new standard against which to measure quality. Many believe the TV-compatible bomba of Raíces will be taken as a true representation of the bomba of the people. To a foreigner or to a Puerto Rican living abroad, and perhaps most significantly of all, to the young Puerto Rican expatriate engaged in building her/his sense of identity and connection, the authenticity of a popular practice would, according to critics, be diminished in relation to the more powerful and lasting produced televised images. The subjective images represented on TV could turn out to be a much more formidable obstacle to the recognition and development of traditional bomba than the many years of its systematic neglect. Choreographer and

bomba entrepreneur Elia Cortés expressed the opposite regarding the impact of such a programme on Puerto Ricans abroad. She admitted Raíces was a positive influence that was partially responsible for the formation of bomba groups in San Diego, San Francisco, and even Switzerland. *“Many of the people I am working with outside of Puerto Rico used it [Raíces] as a basis for forming their groups...perhaps it will encourage others to try and capture some other things that couldn’t be there, to produce things at this high production level. Nothing like this had ever happened. I sure hope that the people that have the money can grasp the importance of Raíces and recognize that things were missing here that they may want to see continue”*.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the leaders of these ensembles, encouraged by Raíces, used it as a starting point to delve deeper into regional styles and performance practice. The pessimism of the critics overlooked the determination of Puerto Ricans at home and abroad to engage in difficult but rewarding searches for musical authenticity.

What images sparked the controversy? Following I present selected instances of crossed cultural messages and naïve representations as seen in Raíces.

The first example comes from the opening musical number, an interpretation of the medley containing the song “Cuembe na’ ma ” by Rafael Cepeda. The scene’s main protagonists are two female dancers involved in a duel between a flamenco-rumba dance sequence and a Santurce-style cuembe dance. A close look at the main drummers reveals a puzzling inconsistency in a programme that promotes itself as being about musical roots. The drummers are: conga virtuoso Giovanni Hidalgo<sup>10</sup>, on the main stage and two accompanying drummers José Emmanuelli and Ramón M. Gómez, off to a side of that

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<sup>9</sup> Elia Cortés, interview July 27, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Though not necessarily a good bomba soloist.

stage. Gómez, oddly, is the only one playing a real bomba drum even though it is Emmanuelli who is a prominent soloist on the bomba scene. Hidalgo and Emmanuelli are playing single LP congas<sup>11</sup>. The bomba employs the exclusive use of “barriles de bomba” whose sound, technique and appearance differ radically from that of congas, as can be seen in most subsequent scenes in the film. Though the rhythm accompanying the bomba portion of the dance was musically correct, the wisdom of misrepresenting the only instrument of this tradition is questionable at best. In the bomba, the designated role of the solo drum is to accompany, mark, and enhance the various steps of the solo dancer. Here again, the scene features a musical arrangement where the drummer merely interjects solo rhythmic statements simultaneous with the unrelated moves by the dancer. In a number of instances Mr. Hidalgo is seen glancing around the set apparently enjoying the celebration rather than having his eyes set firmly on the dancer poised to respond to every move as would be expected. This symbolic depiction of a grass roots traditional music subverted by a more globalized and diluted performance practice disturbed passionate bomba followers.

Edgardo Díaz Juliá’s essay “Viaje a las raíces” (Voyage to the roots) described that same opening scene as a collage of images, music, pop stars and movement that would have delighted Roland Barthes or Federico Fellini. He wrote “there’s something very oniric (dream-like) about this scene with Olga Tañón, José Feliciano, Mark Anthony, Lucasita Benítez, etc....all of them far from the trappings and masks of fame, vulnerable to this bunch of people, so ready to just jam this rumba flamenca, like the burundanga<sup>12</sup> of Palés<sup>13</sup>, an unleashing of the flamenco dancer and white lace by the

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<sup>11</sup> Note: Giovanni Hidalgo is the top Latin Percussion artist of the LP drum company bevy of signed artists.

<sup>12</sup> An Afro-Caribbean term denoting a mix or a bricolage. Palés Matos, 1974. Original publication 1937.

bomba.”<sup>14</sup> The fascination with this dream-like scene was lost on the traditional performers who could only see a trivialization and misrepresentation of the music, the instruments and the essential bomba dialogue itself. The implication of some ancient connection between flamenco and bomba, should there be one, is rendered meaningless to all viewers, as it is never addressed any time during that scene or anywhere in the remainder of the special. Regrettably, these kinds of crossed cultural messages are the easiest to convey and the most difficult to clarify.

The final scene of the programme features a performance by the reggae-inspired band *Cultura Profética* consisting a horn section, a DJ, some burru-style drummers, rhythm section and finally bomba drums. The appearance of this eclectic ensemble at this final point in the programme suggests the producers are proposing a strong transnational connection between other Caribbean culture and the bomba. Implicit also is some causal link between the scene’s breakdancing<sup>15</sup> and the bomba. The Caribbean link has already been clearly established by *Dufrasne*<sup>16</sup> and others<sup>17</sup>; the link with breakdancing will prove much harder to establish given that the interplay of that dance form, insofar as the drumming is concerned, is not at all interactive.

One of the most poignant moments of the final scene was easily one of its most elusive. Downstage left of the bomba drumming section, a small riser featured an authentic bomba drum, without a player. The iconic positioning of the drum is reinforced as a close-up reveals the inscription of the drum maker, *Jesús Cepeda*. This famous

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<sup>13</sup> Luis Palés Matos (1898-1959), prominent local poet, distinguished for the African allusions in his body of work.

<sup>14</sup> Díaz Juliá, *Viaje a las Raíces*, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Breakdancing emerged in New York City in the late 1970s among Latino and Black youth. Its influences also include soul, funk, and Brazilian capoeira.

<sup>16</sup> *Dufrasne*, 1985.

<sup>17</sup> Vega Drouet 1979, McCoy 1968, Barton 1995

craftsman, master player and teacher is, ironically, the one person that is not to be found anywhere in the film itself. The scene seems to pay tribute to “el maestro Jesús Cepeda” a living artist whom the producers would have preferred to have participate in the programme.

If the programme was about the roots of the bomba, why would the final scene showcase an ensemble playing a thirty-year-old Marley-style reggae? Why would that same final beach scene derail the entire message by having all the musicians make a run for the water in a splashing frenzy to the beat of a straightforward 4/4 drum set groove and guitar-based song to freedom? These choices undermined the programme’s own narrative and projected a future direction articulated by an almost archaic pop genre. As Barthes states in *Mythologies* “*the sign in this case overshoots the target and discredits itself by letting its aims appear clearly*”<sup>18</sup>.

The programme that was to be about the bomba turned out to be about the bomba’s place in a continuum that continues to evolve along numerous new routes, not all of them related to the basic values or practices of the tradition. The commercial presentation of the bomba left an impression that Stuart Cosgrove called “*world music sounds as aural tourism*”<sup>19</sup>. The attempt to embrace this “other” Puerto Rican identity, regardless of any good intentions obfuscated the search for the true roots of our heritage.

The Banco Popular valiantly set out to produce what they “*clearly knew would be a controversial project*”<sup>20</sup> fully aware of the muted racial issues and sensitivities regarding whether the average Puerto Rican would identify with this music. The bomba

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<sup>18</sup> Barthes, 1973.

<sup>19</sup> Goodwin, and Gore “World Beat in the Cultural Imperialism Debate” p.128-129 in Sakolsky, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Carmen Lidín, executive director Fundación Banco Popular, interview July 2004.

community, however, felt the controversy ran far deeper, touching difficult issues related to the privilege of financial power and representation and the considerable artistic license that these privileges have historically presumed within colonial and post-colonial culture. Puerto Rican author José Luis González states that in Puerto Rico, “*what is presented as general culture, that is to say, national culture, is, naturally, the culture of the dominant class*”.<sup>21</sup>

The bomba community thought the bank did succeed in producing an attractive TV special, but did so by constructing novel and arguably false images of traditional bomba. There was a perceivable discomfort in the bomba community that, though the bank did succeed in producing an attractive TV special, it did so by constructing novel and arguably false images of the traditional bomba. Having only recently regained popularity as an off-stage, participatory popular art form, bomba practitioners resisted a potentially massive makeover by way of media and resisted relinquishing their traditional street-level control. The bomba community, faced with the threat of a massive redefinition by way of mass media, was not ready to relinquish its traditional “street level” control over the practice. A national TV special could potentially derail the ongoing cultural evolution of the bomba and impose artificial standards of excellence. This type of appropriation and dilution of national expressions is a continual burden to those struggling to overcome a marginalized artistic status.

The producers of Raíces forged a new route for the bomba by inadvertently launching a critical renewal of its practices. This renewal involved giving the bomba a level of media exposure never seen before; igniting a necessary dialogue among practitioners; promoting a musical movement that was well underway; forcing the

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<sup>21</sup> González, 1980.

community to deal with its internal rivalries and its representational insecurities; and most importantly, vindicating the contribution of Afro-Puerto Ricans to the national musical heritage. The bomba is at a transitional point of instability where changes capable of rendering the next stage must be negotiated by those promoting development, those advocating historical recreations and those that saw the future in a radically renewed model

While Raíces has already been judged favourably on the merit of its artistic production, its greatest legacy will be that its controversy empowered many simultaneous voices to collectively confront the difficult issues facing it and ensure the bomba remains a coveted national musical expression.

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