

Dancing national identity:

The evolution of meta-narratives in Colombian and Filipino folk dance

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Abstract:

The Philippines and Colombia share a history of colonial conquest from the same country, Spain. This shared history has influenced the ways in which folk dance has developed. Both countries have a wide folk repertoire, some of which reflects the different ways in which Spanish source material has been processed, adapted, and fused with local material to represent ways in which the past is remembered.

Despite the apparent disparity, two dances in particular, the Cariñosa in the Philippines, and the Bambuco in Colombia, share similar features in terms of their choreographic material and narratives. This article explores several meta-narratives in both sets of dances, and the politics of memory behind them, through an interdisciplinary approach, intertwining cultural representation and choreographic politics. Included in this comparative exploration are the choices towards reflecting local identities through folk dance and some of the implications of these representations in both physical and political terms.

Introduction

A man and a woman gaze at each other from across a room. They are wearing 19th century Fil-Hispanic dress. They move towards each other, circling each other, before playfully grasping opposite sides of a handkerchief, dancing around it. It is an intensely romantic dance: the man chasing, but never catching the woman; the woman encouraging, but also coy and reserved. The dance is called the Cariñosa, and is part of a subset of Filipino folk dances called the Maria Clara Suite.

A man and a woman gaze at each other from across a room. They are wearing 19th century Colombian dress. They move towards each other, circling each other, before playfully grasping opposite sides of a handkerchief, dancing around it. It is an intensely romantic dance: the man chasing, the woman encouraging, coy and

reserved at first, then gaining confidence. They circle, gazing at each other, flirting, exchanging glances, ending up as a couple. The dance is called the Bambuco, and is part of a subset of Colombian folk dances.

These two dances, one from the Philippines, in Southeast Asia, and one in Colombia, in South America, share particular features. Both involve the concept and practice of courtship, and both reveal a connection to a colonising country and religion; in this case Spain and Catholicism. They both also express something around indigenising concepts; using movement material from a particular source and adapting it for local conditions, and to express national sentiments from opposite sides of the Pacific.

The impetus for this paper arose when the authors, who both had experience in the Philippines with Filipino folk dance, visited Colombia in 2018 and 2019, and saw the Bambuco being performed. We noticed several similarities within the dances straight away, which were obvious even to outsiders who didn't know the dances well, or the cultures to which they belonged. The question that we immediately asked ourselves was: What connected these two geographically disparate dances, from opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean? Further questions followed: What sort of representational value did the dances have? How did they develop, and why might they be important today?

This piece of writing examines some historical and political aspects of these two dances, tying them into a shared narrative around colonialism and a process of indigenisation. Finding the commonalities between these dances and the ways in which they have developed can be revealing of how postcolonial identities can be created and maintained. Exploring differences can be equally revealing. As such, a comparative study, exploring what has been written about the dances, as well as watching live performances, recorded performances and practical engagement in dance classes by the authors, gives a brief overview of the dances from an academic, embodied perspective. This experience includes ways of remembering the past through strategies of identity politics and performative display.

The authors bring their different specialisms to the paper. José M. Díaz Rodríguez brings his postcolonial, political and representational analysis, while Declan Patrick approaches the subject from a performative, embodied perspective. Both are interested in the performance of identity: how a nation-state decides to represent itself on the international stage, and how the ideas extant in that representation reflect, build and maintain a national narrative about who people are, and have been. This interest underpins this paper. Added to this, Díaz Rodríguez

is Spanish, while Patrick is a New Zealander; in essence one researcher from an ex-colonial power, and one from a colonised nation. In a project where ideas around the nation-state and its representation are key, this allows for a variety of approaches and viewpoints. In order to include this range of viewpoints, and to provide some answers to the initial research questions, we have divided the material in different sections. We will offer a brief description of the origin of both sets of dances and move to the analysis of several narratives around the themes of identity and (post-)colonialism. But firstly, it is worth examining the Cariñosa and the Bambuco in the context of their respective nations, as a central feature of both dances.

Dance and the nation

The functions dance performs within a culture are myriad. For many people dance is an entertainment, a spectacle they can watch that gives them viewing pleasure. For others, the act of dancing can give a sense of enjoyment, but more, of building community, with shared values expressed through that dance. Values and ideas are made manifest, embodied through the physical actions of the dance, through the music and the context. Values and ideas that talk about the past, and how “we” got here, to this moment in time, but also to where “we” want to go in the future and how “we” want to be perceived.

A dance performance can also be a site of resistance, in which hegemonic patterns of thought are undermined and traditional meanings are challenged. It can be a site where cultures can meet, creating a liminal space where a type of hybridisation can occur. As such, dance, even notated dance, is not a form stuck in time, unchanging and eternal, but rather a type of living palimpsest, where if you are careful, you can see and feel the traces of what has come before, even as you add another layer of signification on the text of the dance, as this piece of writing does.

Additionally, a dance performance can be understood as a marker of a range of identities, including that of nationality. A specific dance piece can be selected (by critics, governments or arts funding bodies) as a National Dance. In this context, and following Pierre Bourdieu's concepts in his study of cultural products, the dance piece enters the field of cultural production and becomes different from any other dance piece: it comes to be a sign of distinction (Bourdieu, 1998), by being considered and portrayed as representative of the whole nation.

Both dances discussed in this paper have had representational weight. They became the sign for the nation, before falling out of fashion, and rival dances taking the weight of national representation. Chasteen, in his book *National Rhythms, African Roots*, says, “Dance, even more than music, speaks to collective identities of various kinds. First it plays a part in generating those identities” (2004, p. 11). This notion of dance functioning to generate identities, rather than simply reflecting them, speaks to the ongoing development of the form. The act of generating identities is a complex business, which involves a number of social, political and cultural aspects; however, dance as one of the aspects that generates identity (even in the negative) is influential.

Dance researcher Judith Lynne Hanna (2010) describes the Bambuco as a dance that is both nationalistic and romantic. This places the dance as important through two focuses: the focus of courtship and marriage as well as the focus of national identity making one of the collective identities to which Chasteen refers. These two are not mutually exclusive, and it is clear there is a connection between how a society constructs courtship rituals and national identity. This sense of generation of national identity is further developed by Colombian folklorist Javier Ocampo López, who considers that the Bambuco “... is the most typical folkloric dance of the Andean zone, and in essence the most representative national dance of Colombia. A Spanish and indigenous rhythmic mix” (2011, p. 245).¹ It is telling that Ocampo López identifies the region the dance is from before applying (in an essentialist manner) the dance to the rest of the country, adding a colonising Spain into the mix as a component. He considers the dance (from one specific region) as a representation of national identity in its entirety.

Music researcher John Varney (2001) outlines the evolution of the musical form of Bambuco. He considers that it represented the country from the early 19th century onwards. However, he mentions that the change to the Cumbia as a national dance happened relatively recently. The first bill in Colombia that aimed to declare the Cumbia as part of the immaterial cultural heritage of the Caribbean coast to be protected came up in 2007 (Congreso Visible, n.d.). More recently (in August, 2021), the Colombian National Council for Cultural Heritage endorsed an application for Cumbia to be considered as National Heritage (Ministerio de Cultura, 2021).

The Philippines went through a similar change in national dance during the 1970s, when the dances that make up the Filipino folk dance canon came to signify a ‘Filipino-ness’ that the dances didn’t originally have (Villaruz 2006). Taken from the context of ritual or rural life, the dances have changed their function and

meaning. They have been made to bear the weight of national expectation. Now the dances have become something to take national pride in, something that “talks” to all Filipinos about how to be a Filipino, how to view the past and use it to negotiate the present. This change saw the national dance change from the Cariñosa to the Tinikling. This is outlined by Patrick (2021), where he discusses the ways in which the dances were thought of, but also what institutions, such as the Philippine Folk Dance Society, expect from a national dance; a dance that encompasses values various institutions think are national values (Guillem, 2003).

Besides the consideration of the Bambuco and the Cariñosa as national dances at certain times, both dances come from very specific regions in their countries of origin, and so it is useful to describe where the dances come from, and how they relate to the more general folkloric canon in their respective contexts.

Locating the Cariñosa and the Bambuco dances

The Filipino dance folkloric canon, when performed by dance companies, usually comprises five suites of dances. The Maria Clara Suite is one of these, and the Cariñosa dance is part of it. The Maria Clara Suite is a collection of dances that represents both a physical area—the urban dwelling, lowland Christianised Filipinos—and a theme also; courtship and love in the Spanish colonial Philippines of the 19th century (Patrick, 2021). The name Maria Clara calls to mind virtue, virginity and saintliness, as epitomised by the heroine of José Rizal’s novels *Noli Me Tangere* (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (1891). The two novels were appropriated by the nationalist cause, making Rizal the hero and martyr of the revolution and the Philippine national hero. As Díaz Rodríguez adds to this idea: “Not only Rizal is a key figure in Philippine history, but also a key player in the continuing and evolving process of defining Filipino identity ...” (Díaz Rodríguez, 2018, p. 137). This is an interesting point of view, as the dances that have taken Maria Clara as their inspiration are also part of the process of identity reflection and creation.

The fictional Maria Clara still epitomises the perfect Filipina for many (Díaz Rodríguez, 2016). Furthermore, in Rizal’s books, the gentle character of Maria Clara is portrayed as a symbol of the Philippines and linked to the concept of hybridity, as she is the daughter of a Filipina and a Spanish priest. This feature of Maria Clara has been discussed by Filipino academic Nick Joaquin, who is very critical of her as a symbol of the country, stating that

... the figure of María Clara ... continues to scandalize us. Why did Rizal choose for a heroine a mestiza of shameful conception? ... Whether she was a heroine to him or not, she is no heroine to us; and all the folk notions of Maria Clara as an ideal or a symbol of the Mother Country, must be discarded. (Joaquin, 2005, p. 65)

Despite this type of criticism, Maria Clara has become a powerful symbol of the country (Díaz Rodríguez, 2016) and has given her name to the suite of dances that represents a specific space and time: the Philippines colonised under Spanish rule. A similar historical connection can be found in the Colombian Bambuco, as its origins also date from Spanish colonial times (Olivella, 1967).

There is little critical writing around Bambuco as a dance. There is writing around the musical form, such as the work of John Varney, but most writing on the Bambuco dance tends to be descriptive. Just as folk dance in the Philippines is divided up into five suites, folk dance in Colombia is divided up into four regions (in this case, corresponding with physical areas). The Bambuco is from the Andean region of Colombia and is tri-ethnic in origin. This refers to European, Indigenous Indian and African influences, although folklorist Delia Zapata Olivella (1967) discusses this as a contentious idea, with many seeing it as bi-ethnic, Indian and European. As such, both the Cariñosa and the Bambuco are sites of hybridity—of cultures meeting, and merging—the result being both autochthonous and European.

Another interesting similarity between the Bambuco and the Cariñosa dances is that both of them are frequently displayed as cultural artefacts in prestigious theatrical settings, by dancers trained in elite forms of folk dance performance and arranged by internationally renowned choreographers—a far cry from the participatory, humble origins of the dances. In relation to the roots of the Bambuco, Colombian scholar Guillermo Abadía Morales emphasises it as a dance with its origins in the peasant classes. He sees it as an affectionate, naive dance implying a type of simplicity associated with nostalgic recollection: “The Bambuco is, as a sentimental expression, a ‘peasant idyll’ that indicates the timid babbling of love in the steps of a naive dance. The man delicately pursues the woman; the woman shyly consents” (Abadía Morales, 2016, p. 15).

As a dance firmly located in a time and place, the Bambuco shares with the Cariñosa a reductive representation of gender that can be traced back to the colonial influences of the dances. That representation is articulated through costuming, music, relationships between dancers, relationships between dancers and their

audiences, steps, and context. Specific gender narratives are another point of connection between both sets of dances.

Gender narratives

Dance can represent a range of culturally based behaviours, from rituals of war to mimetic representation of culturally important activities and processes. One of these processes is becoming a sexually active adult. Hanna argues that dance has an educational element in this case. “Dancing belongs to the repertoire of resources for sex role scripting which educates young and old alike about what it means to be a man or woman” (Hanna, 1988, p. 47).

The Maria Clara dances in general, and the Cariñosa in particular, embody a certain type of behaviour, as does the Bambuco. Both are courtship dances, which entail the whole heavyweight of the political construction of the institution of marriage, as well as the social construction of courtship. The Cariñosa is a dance that is characterised by the “Filipino system, no touch” (Guillem, 2003, p. 19). However, other dances from the same time period and from a similar place of origin do not have the same physical restrictions. The Colombian Bambuco does not have the same restriction on touching; however, slightly further north, in the Ecuadorian Bambuco, according to Whitten and Aurelio Fuentes (1966), the dancers never touch, and the most contact they have is via the ubiquitous handkerchief. Leopoldo Lugones, the Argentine poet, talks about Central and South American hybrid dances from a more artistic point of view:

The rhythm, the male element, is cheerful and virile, while the melody cries with melancholy tenderness. This way is more descriptive of the double soul that the dancing couple encloses, conserving all their individuality to the man and the woman, who never get to unite materially ... Man and woman always remain separated, their contact, when there, eventual and fleeting. (Lugones cited in Abadía Morales, 2016, pp. 15–16)

Considering the case of the Ecuadorian system of Bambuco leads to the idea that perhaps the “Filipino system—no touch” is not a Filipino system at all, but rather a Spanish colonial construct that the Colombian Bambuco transgresses. This is one of the aspects that will benefit from further investigation.

Another common aspect of the Cariñosa and the Bambuco dances relate to their conception as a teaching tool. In a way, both dances project, and enforce, a European (Spanish) version of romantic love and courtship exported to the colonies,

but taken and adapted to particular circumstances. The public nature of the dances, especially during their heyday in the late 19th and early 20th century, meant that they became a public display of heterosexuality and religious orthodoxy. The dances exist almost as a sort of manual on the relationships between men and women according to the Spanish Catholic colonisers. The space created between the dancers' bodies is carefully circumscribed. Male-female pairings are created as the only possible gender combination, displayed for all to see, and internalised. Physical contact carried with it explosive sexual significance for the Spanish and was an act that had to be controlled, perhaps showing a European fear of the overwhelming perceived sexual productive capacity of the colony, as suggested by critics, such as in classic postcolonial studies (Said, 1978) and later ones, such as Hall:

Sexuality was a powerful element in the fantasy which the West constructed, and the ideas of sexual innocence and experience, sexual domination and submissiveness, play out a complex dance in the discourse of the West and the Rest. (1992, p. 302)

The fixed gender roles is a feature of both the Cariñosa and the Bambuco dances that has remained relatively stable since its colonial origins and performed according to specific rules regarding elements, such as choreography and costumes, which have been established to last. But despite this perception of gender dating from colonial times, this narrative can be (and has been) subverted in recent versions of some folk dances, such as the 2006 performance entitled *Love, Death, and Mompou*, which included a postcolonial revision of the Cariñosa dance, choreographed by Cynthia Lapeña (Díaz Rodríguez, 2016). In this subversive version of the Cariñosa, Lapeña explores the effects of colonialism through the dance, discussing issues relating to mimicry, control, loss of identity, clashes and change. Her perception of the colonial relationship is that of a series of processes that aim to control minds and bodies, but cannot quite realise its goals, and so the effects of colonialism, although devastating, become a site of hybridity, of the creation of something new. Even though this show can be understood as a “recent” postcolonial statement, we can also find several postcolonial narratives in the dances we are discussing in this article, as the Bambuco and the Maria Clara have both trespassed their colonial origins and have developed in their historical and geographical contexts to move with the times and become current and symbolic of the nation-states to which they belong. For this reason, it is worth exploring some of the postcolonial aspects related to the dances.

Postcolonial narratives

The perceived superiority of the colonisers' culture in the 19th century is perhaps where the Cariñosa and the Bambuco meet most clearly. Both dances have traits which have developed from Spanish dances, imported from Europe, and that have gone through a process of indigenisation: moving from the ballrooms and soirees of the elite into community festivals and celebrations, changing, developing and becoming more than the source materials. These processes have then developed further, with folk dance reclaimed by the post-colonial, nation-building project. This has involved the dances being collected, notated and claimed by regional and national dance companies, who perform adapted versions in prestigious venues. The dances themselves are taken out of context (or re-presented in a new context) to be used as cultural fragments representing the post-colonial nation-state (Patrick, 2015). This often occurs in a competitive environment and can become a competition to “dance the nation”, through the judges' selection of what elements and ideas are the most important. As such, this representation is ongoing and fluid, much like any other kind of identity.

Colombian folk dance expert Delia Zapata Olivella asks,

What legacy did the Spaniards leave Colombia? The conquerors brought their own culture and implanted it. The artistic expressions of the Indian and the Negro were despised and, in some cases, prohibited. Yet Indian and African traits persisted in some measure. (1967, p. 92)

The introduction and persistence of indigenous aspects in the dances, added to the “implanted” aspects, give an impression of an indigenous culture adapting to colonising forces. The African/Indigenous aspects of the dances interacting with, and adapting to the hegemonic Spanish aspects. The sense of these hybrid forms emerging through a popular culture of the colonised, which then come to represent a nation, and are later discarded as representations when the nation outgrows them, becomes clear. This sense of hybridity is supported by Chasteen (2004), when he discusses the historical development of the Bambuco as a moment where the indigenous concept of the group dance meets the dance of two—European—which becomes a couple dance, where the couple do not touch.

The case in the Philippines has some striking similarities. The Cariñosa, as part of the Maria Clara Suite, can be seen as a memorialisation of Spanish colonial rule. Folk dance collection in the Philippines only began in the 1920s, with Francesca Reyes Aquino, and by that stage the United States had already purchased the

Philippines from Spain, had conducted years of “pacification” (recently recognised as a war of aggression) and was the colonial master in the Philippines, and had been for a good 20 years. As such, the Cariñosa was already old-fashioned and subject to a kind of nostalgia that has continued well into the 21st century. The Maria Clara dances are ones that have a strong “western” flavour, having travelled from elsewhere in the world to the Philippines, and as such can be considered less tied to the concept of Asia and more attached to the idea of the colonial past (Patrick, 2021). This is a common feature with the Bambuco, as a dance with a European-Spanish flavour that is more connected to the colonial past.

The Cariñosa can be seen as old-fashioned, to the point that many Filipino folk dance companies describe it as a costume dance, that is, a dance that is more about displaying a costume than actually performing a dance. The concepts and values in the dance can be reduced to the ability of the dance to showcase dresses, in particular the Maria Clara style of dress. Learning the dance, however, is a different matter; the constraints of the dress, the movements possible in it, and the physical relationships built into the dance provide a way of remembering for the dancer, if not necessarily an audience.

In contrast, Chasteen discusses the ways in which “the history of Latin-American popular dance is all about fluidity and transformation” (2004, p. xi). This implies that the Bambuco has managed to adapt over the years, to maintain some sort of relevance in a changing country and world. Indeed, when the authors learned to perform the dance, its tri-ethnic origins and movements with specific meanings were pointed out and explained by the teacher. These included the use of somatic images (“drag your legs and feet—feel you are pulling heavy chains”). The class both authors attended was specifically designed for foreigners trying Bambuco for the first time and was presented as a fun activity that would give an insight into the culture of Colombia. The contrast between dancing in a group, and dancing in pairs, as well as the juxtaposition between the heaviness of the legs and feet and the flirtatious lightness of the upper body movements gave a physical understanding of the adaptations and contradictions within the dance.

This sort of pointed, physical, somatic insight is not necessarily apparent to an audience, but like the Cariñosa gives the dancer a way of accessing cultural knowledge through the body.

Conclusions

This study of two dances, from opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean, has revealed a number of similarities.

Representational weight, indigenisation, gender and religious orthodoxy all seem to have worked in similar ways through the dances. But more than that, there seems to be a thread connecting these two disparate dances, a thread that leads back to Spain and the historical moment of colonisation, but also the process of constructing hybrid identities after independence. Even after losing the status of representing the nation, these dances have remained, even endured in the folkloric canon, serving multiple functions in multiple contexts; adapting to the changing political and social landscape to become a way of physically memorialising a past for dancers and representing an identity discarded on the way to a post-colonial nationhood.

These dances can be seen as privileged, reductive, nostalgic colonial representations, but can also be viewed and danced as a declaration of difference, of survival through hybridity and a way forward to bring a problematic past into the present and future.

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ⁱ All translations of cited works published in Spanish (Abadía Morales, 2016, and Ocampo López, 1984, and 2011) are by Díaz Rodríguez.