

African Performance Review

Vol. 16, No. 1, 2026

pp. 47-75

Yusimi Moya Rodriguez's 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba': Oshún as La Mulata in Afro-Cuban, African Caribbean, and Circum-Caribbean Sexualities and Libidinal Economies.¹

D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson²

Bowling Green State University, U.S.A. (forbeda@bgsu.edu)

Abstract:

It is said that Oshún, Orisha (Goddess) of love, sex, intimacy, fertility, rivers, streams, dance and honey – transformed into a *mulata* (Brown woman) and travelled from *orun* (the sky) to *aiye* (the earth) to be with Africans who were forced into slavery in Cuba in the early 1500s. Despite contradictions in colourism, Oshún as *La Mulata* represented all Cubans (Black, white, mixed-race) mentioned in *patakis* (sacred stories) in Lukumí (Santería), a five-hundred-year-old Afro-Cuban Yoruba religion (De La Torre, 2004: 207). I explore the erotic and sensual figure of Oshún as *La Mulata* in *Oshún Pasanga* ('Oshún as Divine Courtesan'), one of thirty-eight avatars of Oshún through the artistic dance piece, 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba' (2017) by Afro-Cuban dancer and choreographer, Yusimi Moya Rodriguez. Based in Vienna, Austria, Rodriguez was born in Havana, Cuba in

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30817/0161.apr0222>

² D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson is an Assistant Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies, Department of Theatre and Film, Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, USA. She has published widely in areas of African, African American, Latin American, and Caribbean theatre/performance studies. Her research focuses on Africana performance, African Caribbean spirituality/religions, sacred queer spaces in masquerades and dance. Forbes-Erickson is an Executive Committee member of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), a Co-Convenor for IFTR's African and Caribbean Theatre and Performance Working Group, and a Coordinator for the Caribbean Studies Association, CSA Voices, a speakers' series on Caribbean Studies scholarship. She is the Founder and Artistic Director of the Pan-African Theatre Ensemble for Africana theatres.

1987, and studied dance at the *Escuela Nacional de Arte* (ENA) in Havana, graduating in 2005 with the title, "Professional Dancer and Professor of Contemporary and Folk Dance," specializing in Afro-Cuban and folkloric dance. I theorize Rodríguez's artistic dance as Oshún-as-performance through patakís and sacred dance traditions to discover Oshún's mysteries and manifestation in the figure of *La Mulata* in nineteenth century masquerade balls in African Caribbean and circum-Caribbean performances. I argue that Oshún appears as *Oshún Pasanga* (Oshún as "Divine Courtesan") as erotic power countering nineteenth century colonial representations of *La Mulata* in libidinal economies and in the matrix of race, gender, and sexual identities.

Keywords:

Oshún sacred dance, Masquerade Balls, Placage, Afro-Cuban, Circum-Caribbean, *La Mulata*,

Prelude:

Lukumí Patakí #1:

Obbatala [creator of humanity and father of all Orishas] had been speaking with Olofi, the supreme creator of the world. Obbatala asked, 'Father, what will be the destiny for humans [Africans] on earth?'

Olofi responded, 'Slavery.'

Obbatala consulted the divine tablero and it was confirmed. Obbatala was horrified.

Nearby, Oshún had been listening. She said to Olofi, "Father, if slavery is the destiny for humans [Africans] on earth, I will not stay here in Orun (the sky), I will go with them."

And all of the Orishas who wanted to accompany her to the earth did. And for this reason, they say Oshún arrived with the slaves to Cuba (Espino, 2017).

Lukumí Patakí #2

... one story of the deity [Ochun]³ tells about the sadness of the goddess of love as she watched her children forced from their home to be taken to a new land named Cuba. Ochun visited her sister Yemaya, to ask her advice. 'It must be this way, Ochun', Yemaya told her. 'Our children will now go through the world spreading our wonders and millions will remember us and worship us once again'. But Ochun wanted to be with her children and asked Yemaya, who had traveled

³ Variations in the spelling of Oshun in the Americas include Osun, Oxum, Oxun, Ochun depending on region and language (Felder, 2025: 22-23).

the world over, to describe Cuba to her. 'It is much like here: hot days, long nights, calm rivers, abundant vegetation, but not everyone is black like us; there are also many whites'. Ochun decided to join her suffering children in Cuba and asked her sister to grant her two favors before leaving: Please make my hair straighter and my skin lighter so that all Cubans can see some of themselves in me'. Her wish was granted, and Ochun became Cuba's beloved saint (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2022: 60).

Act I. Oshún as *La Mulata* in Cuba – A Contextual Background

Scene 1

Magical stories about Oshún, Orisha (Goddess) of love, sex, intimacy, eroticism, dance, rivers and streams – abound in patakís (sacred stories) in *La Regla de Lukumí* (The Order of Lukumí/Lukumí), a five-hundred-year-old Afro-Cuban Yoruba religion brought to Cuba by enslaved Africans from the early 1500s (Lele, 2011: 7; Vega, 2000: 2-3). It was Spanish colonists who called Lukumí *Santería* – 'the way of the saints' – believing that enslaved Africans were worshiping Roman Catholic saints when in fact enslaved Africans were camouflaging Orishas (Gods/Goddesses) as Roman Catholic saints to avoid persecution, and to preserve Lukumí in secret (Lavery, 2021; Vega, 2000: 2; De La Torre, 2004: 207).⁴ Lukumí priests and priestesses, called Babalawos ('fathers in the spirit') and Iyalorishas ("mothers in the spirit"), would memorize and perform by rote the countless patakís or sacred stories about Orishas, the cosmos, and all animate and inanimate things (Murell, 2010: 123). In the prelude, the first patakí says that Oshún was so sad to see her children being forced into slavery that she decided to travel with them from Africa to Cuba. Oshún said to Olofi, the Supreme Being, "'Father, if slavery is the destiny for humans [Africans] on earth, I will not stay here in *orun* [the sky], I will go with them.'" And all the Orishas who wanted to accompany her

⁴ Although the Spanish colonial term, *Santería* is sometimes used today, Lukumí devotees like Ocha'ni Lele and Marta Moreno Vega have denounced it and its syncretism in Roman Catholicism, stating instead to follow ancient *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* – 'the origin of our religion' indigenous from sacred city, Ile-Ife in southwestern Nigeria from 10,000 BCE to 500 BCE (Lele, 2011: 7; Vega, 2000, 2-3; Sobrinho and Da Silva, 2023: 215; Berg, 2023: 3). The term, 'Lukumí' is derived from the word, *olukumí*, which means "my friend" in the Owe language from the Oluwumi people, an ethnic group within Yoruba people from Benin and Nigeria (Isinyemeze, 2022). Migene Gonzalez-Wippler states that the word, 'Lukumí' means 'friendship' from the Yoruba word, *akumi*, from the Yoruba people in Sierra Leone (1992: 1). The etymology of 'Lukumí' suggests a greater concentration of Yoruba-speaking people was forced into slavery in Cuba along with Fon, Ewe, Bantu, Carabali, Arara, Ibu, Mandingo and other African ethnicities (Carbonera, 2025: 62).

D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson

to the earth did. And for this reason, they say Oshún [Osun] arrived with the slaves to Cuba' (Espino, 2017). This patakí reflects the journeying experience of Afro-Cubans with Oshún as human and divine.

In the second patakí (sacred story), Oshún asks her sister Yemaya, Orisha of the seas and mother of all, "'please make my hair straighter and my skin lighter so that all Cubans can see some of themselves in me.'" Her wish was granted, and Ochun [Oshún] became Cuba's beloved saint' (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2022: 60). Yemaya transformed Oshún into the symbolic *La Mulata* (Brown woman) with light skin and long hair so that all Cubans (with reference to Black, white and mixed-race identities) would recognize themselves in Oshún with the purpose of spreading Yoruba religion (*Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*) throughout the world (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert p. 60). Oshún as *La Mulata* travelled with enslaved Africans to Cuba where she is the patroness of Cuba, a national treasure, representing all Cubans through transatlantic experience. **Figure 1** shows an eight-inch resin statue depicting Oshún as *La Mulata* in Lukumí for house altars dedicated to ancestors and Orishas called *Bovedas*, with the note to 'place the Orisha Oshún Statue in your sacred space to receive her blessings of love, joy, and prosperity. Let her divine presence inspire beauty, grace, and the nurturing flow of positive energy in your life' (*Original Botanicals*, 2025). This Oshún depicts one of thirty-eight avatars of Oshún called 'Yeye Moro or Yeye Kari' who is the most flirtatious, the most seductive, always admiring herself in her gold mirror decorated with pearls, and has numerous torrid affairs (Gonzalez-Wippler, 1992: 107) in what I describe as sacred eroticism, the driving force of new life and creation.



Figure 1. Orisha Oshún Statue in Afro-Cuban Lukumí Religion depicted as La Mulata (Brown woman) (8" Resin)

Original Botanica: Spiritual Products.

Artist: Anonymous

Available at: <https://originalbotanica.com/orisha-Oshún-statue-8>

(Accessed: 15 November 2025)

However, in western and colonial representations, Oshún as *La Mulata* is stereotypically sexualized, forced into prostitution, sex slavery, race and gender violence, vilified for colourism and eroticism, and depicted as a 'tragic' figure (Borelli, 2014: 64; D'Alessandro, 2022, pp. 145-146). Michael D'Alessandro states that the 'tragic mulata' trope first appeared in French literature in 1815, and later in British and US American literature, theatre, and film throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the present (2022: 145). The tragic mulata in the nineteenth century was a fictional mixed-race woman whose life circumstances meet a tragic end because she was mixed-race in white society (D'Alessandro, 2022: 145). One tragic mulata plot shows how the mulata is light-skinned enough

to 'pass for white', hiding her Black heritage. She is engaged to a white man who does not suspect her to be of Black ancestry. When the mulata's Blackness is revealed, she dies by suicide, or is ostracized (D'Alessandro, 2022: 145-146).⁵ Variations of the tragic mulata trope included 'tragic quadroon' and 'tragic octoroon' tropes for their closer proximity to whiteness. The 1842 novel, *The Quadroons* (1842) by Lydia Maria Child features the tragic end of Xarifa, a quadroon woman (a person with a white father and mulata mother) who is raped and then takes her own life; and Dion Boucicault's 1859 play, *The Octoroon* (1859) with the main character Zoe, an octoroon woman (a person with a white father and quadroon mother) who was about to be sold into slavery, and then kills herself as her white lover George rushes to her side (Child, 1842; Boucicault, 1859).

Afro-Cuban dance and performance theorist, Melissa Blanco Borelli reflects on the difficult lives of mulatas (Brown women) in her own family in Cuba, and bemoans, 'I struggle with the familiar moniker of the "tragic" [mulata] when I think about these corporeality roles in the making of both everyday and "official" histories of the circum-Caribbean. I become baffled at the disjunction between the tragic narrative associated with the mulata, and the visceral, vivacious corporeality of moving through rooms of a salon or ballroom, sitting at a desk and working long hours to support her family' (2014: 64). By 'official histories' Borelli means colonial histories that have produced the figure of *La Mulata* beset with certain demise. Alternatively, Borelli observes one of Oshún's thirty-eight avatars or paths called 'Osun Pasanga (the stream that is a prostitute)' (2014: 72) to counter the tragic mulata trope. Oshún as 'the stream' or 'river' is named after *Odò Ọṣun* (Oshún River) in Yorubaland in Ekiti State in southwestern Nigeria, and is the Orisha of streams, rivers, tributaries, sweet waters and lagoons (Murell, 2010: 215). The term *Osun Pasanga* is derived from Yoruba *Osun Pasange* translated as 'Oshún as Divine Courtesan' with variations of *Osun Pachanga*, *Osun Pasanga*, *Osun Panchágara*, known for eros, sex, intimacy, countless lovers 'like the stars', sensuality, and eroticism (Thompson, 2001: 260).

When the Lukumí term *Osun Pasanga* ('Oshún as Divine Courtesan') is translated into Spanish, the phrase becomes 'Oshún [the stream] as prostitute' with derogatory connotations for 'prostitute'. Another derogatory term for Oshún Pasanga is *La Santa Puta* ('The Holy Whore') or *La Puta Santa* ('The Whore Saint'), syncretized in Roman Catholic iconography of *La Virgen de Caridad del Cobre* (The Virgin of Charity of Cobre) (Teish, 2000: 20) to denigrate the image of the African

⁵ The male variant of the 'tragic mulata' trope, the 'tragic mulato', similarly, ended in calamity. However, the female variant surpassed the male variant in its popularity (D'Alessandro, 2022: 145-146).

Orisha Oshún's sacred eroticism. However, among Lukumí people, *Osun Pasanga* as 'Oshun as Divine Courtesan' is sexual liberation and empowerment from colonial gender-sexual-racial oppression. As a 'Divine Courtesan', Oshún is always sexually fluid, androsexual in her sexual trysts with male and non-binary Orishas with perceived masculinity, and the lover of all male Orishas except Obatala, her father, and Elegguá, her closest friend (Gonzalez-Wippler, 1992: 108).⁶ I argue that Oshún appears as Oshún Pasanga (Oshún as 'Divine Courtesan') in sacred and artistic dance as erotic power and sexual liberation, and counters nineteenth century colonial representations of *La Mulata* in a matrix of race, gender, and sexual identities. I analyse the artistic dance piece, 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba' by Afro-Cuban dancer/choreographer Yusimi Moya Rodriguez, based on Oshún's sacred dance in Lukumí ceremonies that I review in discussion. I theorize "performance" with Oshún-as-performance in the interpretation of patakís of Oshún, and Oshún sacred dance mirrored in the representations of *La Mulata* to disrupt nineteenth century colonial representations of 'tragic' *mulatas* (Brown women). I position Oshún Pasanga (Oshún as Divine Courtesan) in the manifestations of Oshún in selected patakís as Oshún-as-performance, the manifestation of Oshún in patakís and dance. Through Oshún-as-performance, I discover Oshún's mysteries as *La Mulata* (Brown woman) and the attendant implications in the colonial constructs of race, gender, sexuality and skin colour in dance.

⁶ Oshún's lovers include Erinle, Orisha of healing and medicine and who is genderfluid; Shango, Orisha of thunder and lightning, depicted as male; and Ogun, Orisha of iron, war, and metalworking, depicted as male; and Aje-Shaluga, Orisha of wealth, depicted as sometimes male or female (Thompson, 2001: 260). Oshún Pasanga advocates for women's sexual liberation and pleasure, widely referenced as Black femme, using Black femininity as a superpower above all else. Oshún Pasanga's counterpart in Haitian Vodou is Erzili Freda who is the lwa (spirit) of love, beauty, jewellery, dancing, luxury, and flowers, known to seduce women and men, and protects transwomen and *masisi* (gay men) (Tinsley, 2011: 422). In addition to Oshún Pasanga or Oshún Pachangara ('Oshún as Divine Courtesan'), other avatars include 'Oshún Yeye Moro, the perfumed whore', 'Oshún Kayode, the gay dancer', 'Oshún Aña, the lover of the drum', 'Oshún Akuara, she who mixes love potions', 'Oshún Fumike, she who gives children to sterile women', 'Oshún Funke, the wise one', 'Oshún Kole-Kole, the wicked sorceress' (Benítez-Rojo, 1996: 15). 'Yeye Moro or Yeye Kari' is the happiest and most flirtatious avatar of Oshún who constantly admires herself in her pearl-studded gold mirror and has the most seductive love affairs (Gonzalez-Wippler, 1992: 107). Then, there is Oshún Edé, the elegant grand dame who loves musical soirees as the 'perfect hostess and the perfect wife' (Gonzalez-Wippler, 1992: 107).

D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson

By race, I refer to the false, social and libidinal constructs on enslaved and free Africans, Afro-descendants, further subject to skin colour classifications in the nineteenth century. Colonialism - the social and political control over other cultures, further controlled sexuality, sexual expression and erotic autonomy, instituting a Victorian sexuality, well-established during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), known for rigid morality, anti-sensualism, and white heteropatriarchy. White men held total control over white women's sexuality, expected to be chaste and pure to reproduce white heirs for the plantocracy. In contrast, Black women were forced into sexual servitude to white heteropatriarchy to maintain the libidinal economy, expected to be sexually available, violently oppressing Black sexual and gender identities. Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) used of Venetian ceruse or Venetian white, a lead make-up to whiten her skin, which became a popular fashion in British colonies that drew sharp binary contrast between whitened skin and various dark complexions among Black populations (Blay, 2011: 14; Nudson, 2021: 124). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whitened skins among Europeans were associated with purity, intended to distance themselves from all the racial mixing happening in European colonies in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean (Blay, 2011: 14). Skin whitening soon became associated with Elizabethan white femininity, constructing the warped hierarchical colourism that privileged whitened skin as superior and dark skin of enslaved Africans as inferior (Blay, 2011: 14).

I theorize Rodriguez's artistic dance piece as Oshún-as-performance, an interpretation of patakis (sacred stories) and sacred dance traditions to discover the mysteries Oshún's representation as *La Mulata* in African Caribbean and circum-Caribbean. I show Oshún-as-performance in syncretized Roman Catholic iconography in *La Virgen de Caridad del Cobre* (The Virgin of Charity of Cobre), denigrated and misappropriated as *La Santa Puta* ('The Holy Whore'), translated from Oshún Pasanga (Oshún as 'Divine Courtesan') (Brown, 2003: 358; Cabrera, 2023: 117), and further encoded in the embodied knowledge of Afro-Cuban dance piece, 'Orisha Dance from Cuba' (2017) by Yusimi Moya Rodriguez. Then I explore how Oshún-as-performance is manifested in nineteenth century Caribbean and circum-Caribbean masquerade balls for white men's selection of light-skinned Black women for sexual liaisons and common law arrangements called plaçage in New Orleans, concubinage in Jamaica, and for mulata mistresses in Havana, Cuba. From multiple positions, I am an African Caribbean (or West Indian) performance studies scholar specializing in African Caribbean religions and spirituality in performance historiography. I write from the perspectives and epistemologies of African Caribbean spiritual experience; and although I am not Lukumí, I have been drawn to Oshún through serendipity in research, the number seventeen where Oshún is the seventeenth Orisha, the only female, and the youngest among sixteen male Orishas chosen to complete the work of creation

initiated by the Creator of Humanity Obatala or the Creator Deity, Oduduwa. I see other signs of Oshún in my obsession for peacocks, sunflowers, and brass bangles (*ide*) with the onomatopoeia of brass bangles with “*weré weré*” and “*checké checké checké*” in Oshún’s joyful dance indicating that Oshún is nearby. Robert Thompson observes Oshún’s five brass bracelets in the sacred dance are the sounds of tinkling water on the riverbanks – *ide weré weré* (2001: 259). The praise poem recalls:

The flash of brass in the fires of her eyes
Water murmuring over stones is
Oshún dancing with her jewelry of brass.
Only Oshún’s children wear such copper bracelets (2020: 259).

Thompson refers to Oshún’s five brass bracelets as healing onomatopoeic jewellery. Lukumí devotees believe that Oshún’s brass bracelets ‘clears the blood’ (*limpia sangre*) and protect the wearer from ailments (2001: 259).⁷ Onomatopoeic jewellery hail from the old Lukumí chant, ‘*Ide Weré Weré*’, for spiritual initiation to Oshún, the embodiment of divine feminine energy, love, beauty, elegance, sexuality, sensuality, and prosperity.

Ide weré weré nita Oshún
(Brass bangles’ “tinkle, tinkle” belong to Oshún)

Ide weré were
(Brass bangles “tinkle, tinkle”)

Ide weré weré nita Oshún
(Brass bangles’ “tinkle, tinkle” belong to Oshún)

Ide weré weré nita ya
(Brass bangles’ “tinkle, tinkle” belong to you, Oshún)

Ocha kiniba nita Oshún
(Sacred greeting belongs to Oshún)

⁷ Thompson states that fans for Oshún in Cuba are made of palm-leaf material overlaid with expensive cloth, decorated with beads, cowries, jingle bells, and peacock feathers (2020: 259). The beads represent Oshún’s wealth in gold, brass, yellow, or amber. Peacock feathers represent Oshún’s vanity. Five jingle-bells called shaworo are sewn in the fan and are said to frighten death away in the dance (Thompson, 2001: 258-259).

D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson

Checké checké checké
("Chime, chime, chime")

Nita ya
(Belong to you)

Ide weré weré
(Brass bangles' "tinkle, tinkle")

(Public Domain - <https://thebirdsings.com/ide-were-were/>)

Act II. Yusimi Moya Rodriguez and 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba' (2017)

Afro-Cuban dancer/choreographer Yusimi Moya Rodriguez was born in Havana, Cuba in 1987, now based in Vienna, Austria. She studied dance at the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) in Havana, graduating in 2005 with the title, *Bailarín-Profesora de Danza Moderna y Folklorica* (Professional Dancer and Professor of Contemporary and Folk Dance), specialising in contemporary and folkloric dance. Rodriguez was a principal dancer and choreographer with the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba* (also known as the *Ballet Folklórico Nacional*), 2005-2010. *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba* was founded after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 to preserve African dance traditions from slavery era and to teach contemporary Afro-Cuban dance forms and ballet. Rodriguez has toured with *Conjunto Folklórico* in Spain, Netherlands, Portugal and Mexico. By 2011, Rodriguez became the principal dancer with Havana's dance company, *Ebony*, using a blend of modern techniques in African Caribbean dance forms. In 2013, Rodriguez moved to Vienna, Austria, touring across the country with the Latin dance musical, *Bailando*, produced by the Austrian Dance Studio called 'Tambao' and where she teaches Afro-Cuban, Afro-contemporary, and popular Cuban dances such as salsa, rumba, cha-cha-cha. Rodriguez regularly returns to Afro-Cuban dance traditions of Orishas in Lukumí.



Figure 2. Yusimi Moya Rodriguez performing 'Oshún Dance From Cuba' (2017)

<https://www.cubancontemporary.com/projects>

In 2017, Rodriguez produced two Orisha dance videos at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, in collaboration with www.santeria.at, a research centre dedicated to the study of Lukumí in Austria. Rodriguez's artistic portrayals of Orisha in Afro-Cuban traditional dance, especially of Oshún, provide spiritual contexts to complex histories through dance. Venezuelan percussionist Christian Martinek played three bata drums, recording each drum separately, and then overlapping three recordings, and sang in Lukumí, the language spoken by Lukumí people and in Lukumí ceremonies. Rodriguez notes that "this document is a piece of art, that shows the beauty of [transatlantic] Yorùbá traditions and is intended to inspire dancers and Olorishas [initiates] around the globe" (Rodriguez 2017). Rodriguez performs the artistic dance piece 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba' (2017), based on Orisha Oshún's sacred dance with reverence for Oshún (See **Figure 2** for a film still of Rodriguez in performance) (Rodriguez 2017). Rodriguez enters the performance space dressed in a long yellow dress with short, cuffed sleeves, trimmed in white appliqué patterns on the hem, neckline, waist, and short cupped sleeves. Under the yellow dress is a white skirt or petticoat seen when she lifts the dress hem, and with a white head wrap. On her left wrist is a sunflower bracelet and large hoop earrings (Rodriguez 2017).

When Rodriguez first enters the performance space, she is carrying a large straw basket on her head, decorated with silk sunflowers. With arms akimbo (Bolens, 2011: 169), she embodies an authoritative stance and with kinaesthetic intentionality prominent in African Caribbean folk dances (Jackson, 2020: 15). In

the next video frame, Rodriguez begins an Oshún artistic dance without the basket, holding two ends of her dress. The dress flows with her arm movements from holding the ends of the skirt, often with extended arms to show the skirt's fullness. The white petticoat underneath flows with the movement. The dance begins slowly with her gently bouncing torso, arms, neck and head undulating back and forth. Oshún through Rodriguez sometimes dips downward with bounces as if dipping in the river, then gently rolling upwards as if fetching water and splashing it above her head, always smiling.⁸ Rodriguez repeats steps and gestures that gradually quicken these movements and gestures as the drumming and singing quicken, adding new gestures, bigger steps, and more twirling that intensifies towards the end of the dance (Rodriguez 2017). In performing an artistic dance on video, Rodriguez explains that 'this video shows a folkloric dance performance of the Orisha Oshún, a Yorùbá river deity, as danced today in Cuba to the rhythms of the Lukumí batá drums and singing' (2017). Rodriguez's artistic interpretation of the Oshún sacred dance draws on the long history of transatlantic slave trade, embodied in the formation of race, gender, and sexuality under colonialism and enslavement.

Any artistic dance is a set of movements that explores the 'specific historical, cultural, and ideological context in which the performance is situated' (Fuhrman, A., Uytterhoeven and Fensham, 2025: 87). Sarah Whatley contends that dance is 'a complex phenomenon, encompassing cognitive, emotional, cultural, and embodied dimensions' (2025: 109). Oshún sacred dance gestures are portals to higher realms attained through repetitive chants, call-and-response songs, and drumming from traditional bata drums, bells, and rattles that induce trance-like, hypnotic states, and through invoking Oshún and her blessings of fertility, healing, prosperity, and wealth (Tcheuffa, 2025: 88). By focusing on the patakís, I show Oshún's transformation into the figure of La Mulata who travelled to Cuba with enslaved Africans as magical dance performance historiography, embodying experiences of enslaved Africans in Cuba who have always believed in Oshún's love and protection, and that Oshún in turn, embodies the lived realities of Afro-Cubans, and by extension, African Caribbean and circum-Caribbeans in illustrated movement, gestures in Oshún-as-performance in Rodriguez's loving and creative interpretation. Renowned Cuban ethnographer Lydia Cabrera observes in Lukumí patakí that, Black people [Afro-Cubans] humanize everything around them, even the most insignificant things that might appear inanimate.

⁸ In sacred dance for initiation, when Oshun possesses a crying initiate (Olorisha), this is a good sign because it is tears of joy (Siedlak 2018: 9). If the Olorisha possessed by Oshun laughs maniacally, this is a bad sign because it means that Oshun is angry (Siedlak 2018: 9)

(They appear that way!) They conceive the orishas or gods – personal, supernatural, and omnipresent – in their own image and likeness. *A su más pobre semejanza*. They are the same in humans and in the deities whose protection they implore: the deity and the human have the same appetites and needs. What pleases the Black person produces the same material satisfaction in a god or a spirit (2023: 117).

Cabrera points out that Afro-Cubans have always envisioned the Orishas from their experiences through patakís and manifested in Orisha dances. Given this epistemology in patakís, Afro-Cuban and African Caribbean spiritual teachings and practices have always theorized their own performances as the blurring of sacred and secular, and human and divine realms as experienced in Orisha sacred dance and artistic revelations.

Act III. Oshún Sacred Dance

Scene 1

Here, I distinguish dance in the spiritual realm in *orun* (the sky), and on *aiye* (the earth). In the spiritual realm in *orun* (the sky), Wippler describes the dancing Oshún as dressed in gold and yellow, adorned in several gold bracelets and anklets, and chains on her arms (1992: 104). Oshún wears several necklaces, sometimes with white and yellow beads or with white beads alternating with five yellow beads, depending on her paths. Other necklaces would include red, amber, coral or green beads (1992: 105). Her gown is encrusted with tiny mirrors, gold bells, cowries, shells and pearls. For drumming and dancing, Oshún wears white and yellow gingham with a wide ruffled and laced skirt (González-Wippler, 1992: 105). Lukumí Oba Oriate (Lukumí High Priest), Raul Dominguez observes that

Oshún's dance is sensual. She laughs and waves her arms to rattle her handcuffs. Oshún raises her arms above her head to emphasize her charms. While dancing, she makes voluptuous movements and seduces men with her outstretched hands and jerky movements of the hips. She can pretend to row a boat, when combing her hair or admiring herself in the mirror, she is very uptight and looks over her nose at those around her (2021: 124).

In *orun* (the sky), Oshún performs her seductive dance for her numerous lovers where dance activates change and transformation, for example in the patakís about her lovers Ogun, Orisha of iron and technology, and Shango, Orisha of thunder and lord of the dance, music, and virility.

In one patakí, Shango seduced Oya, Orisha of winds and storms, away from Ogun, Orisha of metals and technology. Ogun and Oya went to live in the woods, ceasing Ogun's work and industry in the world. The Supreme Being, Oludumare

sent for Ogun, but Ogun ignored Oludumare's summons to leave the woods and to restore the work of metallurgy and technology. Other Orishas failed to convince Ogun to return to work (González-Wippler, 1992: 109). Oshún volunteered. Oludumare sent Oshún who entered the woods wearing a beautiful translucent, shimmering gold gown with five yellow handkerchiefs tied to her waist. Then Oshún began to sing and dance provocatively when she found Ogun who was smitten by Oshún's seductive wiles. As soon as Oshún was close enough to Ogun, she dipped her finger into her honey gourd and smeared honey on Ogun's lips (González-Wippler, 1992: 105). Ogun was smitten with Oshún who then tied one of her five yellow handkerchiefs around his neck and led Ogun out of the woods and into the presence of Oludumare. Since then, Ogun is madly in love with Oshún. In another seductive dance in the spiritual realm, Oshún fell in love with Shango at a dance party (González-Wippler, 1992: 105). Shango first noticed Oshún after she grabbed a drum and began to play. Oshún then seduced Shango by dipping her fingers in her gourd of honey about her waist and smearing honey on Shango's lips. Shango fell in love with Oshún, overwhelmed by the sweetness of her honey and Oshún's beauty, thus began an eternal love affair between Oshún and Shango (González-Wippler, 1992: 105).

Dance on *aiye* means that Oshún would 'come down' from *orun* to possess or embody a devotee or initiate in sacred dance (Walker, 2001: 48). When an Orisha 'come down' to *aiye* in dance, this is called 'Orisha come down', also known as 'Orisha mounting' or 'manifesting Orisha' (Olmos and Paravesini-Gebert, 2022: 85). Cultural anthropologist Sheila S. Walker explains the concept of "Orisha mounting" or 'manifesting Orisha' as essential:

the relationship between the human and the divine is so intimate that the entering of spiritual beings into the bodies of worshippers, who literally *embody* the divine energies, is the essence of religious ceremonial. If the spirit does not 'move' anyone, if worshippers do not dance the 'holy dance', if the Orishas do not 'manifest' their presence in the human community by dancing in the bodies of their entranced initiates the gestures symbolic of their roles in the cosmos and human life, no spiritual communion has taken place (2001: 48).

Theology scholar Joseph Murphy states that devotees refer to *bajar el santo* ('the saint descending') or *el santo montado* ('the saint mounted') that places emphasis on the 'mounting' action of the Orisha like a horse on the devotee. Mounting is best described as a trance in dance, which is 'tightly choreographed' and 'precise' and recognized immediately by the congregation who can identify specific Orishas by their specific dance (2024: 137). In the spiritual realm and on earth, Oshún's dance is sensual, seductive, sacred eroticism; and this, in the Lukumí, is

Yusimi Moya Rodriguez's 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba'

sexual autonomy, empowerment, creation, a life-giving force, and everything sex positive in Oshún Pasanga.

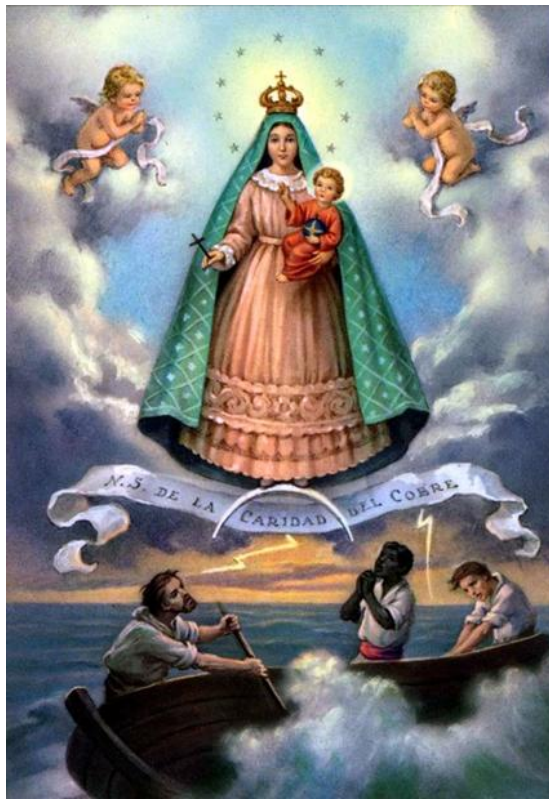


Figure 3. En Español: *Nuestra Señora de Caridad del Cobre* (Our Lady of Charity of Cobre), Patroness of Cuba
Painting 1890-1910; Artist – Anonymous
(Public Domain - <https://picryl.com/media/ourladyofcharity-560387>)

Act III: *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (Our Lady of Charity of Cobre) and *La Santa Puta* (The Holy Whore)

Scene 2

However, in the western, colonial white imaginary, Oshún's eroticism in the avatar, Oshún Pasanga becomes *La Santa Puta* ('The Holy Whore') or *La Puta Santa* ('The Whore Saint'), syncretised in Roman Catholic iconography as *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (*The Virgin of Charity of Cobre*) (Brown, 2003: 358; Teish, 2024: 20). The legend of *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, also called *La Cachita*, says that in 1612, two enslaved Indigenous brothers name Juan and Rodrico de Hoyos, and a ten-year old enslaved African boy named Juan Moreno worked in the copper mines in Nipe Bay near the northeastern region in Cuba. The three enslaved men, known as 'the three Juans', had gone out in their boat to gather salt in Nipe Bay.

They found a small statue of the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, about fifteen inches long, dry and floating in the sea, with the inscription at its feet in Spanish – *Yo Soy La Virgen de La Caridad* (I am the Virgin of Charity). The statue depicted the Virgin Mary (Madonna) as a *mulata* with a *mulato* baby Jesus (Logan, 2005: 8; Borelli, 2014: 123). The three Juans carried the image back to Varajagua, a town near Santiago where a chapel was built in her honour (Gonzalez-Wippler, 1992: 103). **Figure 3** is one of several painted depictions showing the *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* flanked by two angels in the sky, and with ‘the three Juans’ looking up at the Virgin and child. The statue of the *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* is housed in the Basilica National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre in Santiago de Cuba, enclosed in a glass box, standing on an elaborate pedestal above the altar. (See **Figure 4**) *La Virgen* wears gold, white, and yellow robes, decorated with mother of pearl, gold, silver, ivory, and flanked by twelve angels. She wears a diamond crown and pendant, rings, and bracelets. In her right hand, she holds a small emerald crucifix. In her left hand she holds the baby Jesus who holds a globe in his left hand and raises his right hand in a sign of blessing (Gonzalez-Wippler, 1992: 103).



Figure 4. Photo: Statue of *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* in the Basilica National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.

Photographer: Anonymous

Available at: <https://www.dimecuba.com/revista/cubanos/conozca-sobre-la-virgen-de-la-caridad-del-cobre-patrona-de-cuba/> (Accessed: 15 November 2025)

Lukumí devotees have always denounced Roman Catholic syncretism, and have practised their religion in secret, hiding Orishas behind Roman Catholic saints from Spanish enslavers who had persecuted Lukumí and enforced Christian conversions (Lavery, 2021; Vega, 2000: 2; De La Torre, 2004: 207; Lele, 2011: 7). In addition to the Virgin of Charity of Cobre for Oshún, the Spanish Roman Catholic

Church under colonialism imposed other Marian depictions on Orishas such as the 'Virgin of Regla' for Yemaya depicted as a dark-skinned Black woman or the 'Virgin of Candelaria' for Oya, often depicted as a *mulata*, and sometimes represented as a dark-skinned Black woman (Perez, 2011: 202-203). Lukumí devotees persisted in pretending to venerate Roman Catholic saints in public but in private worshiped the Orishas (Vega, 2000: 2). Besides, the nature of the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholicism as 'chaste' and 'pure' is unlike the nature of Oshún as 'sensual' and 'seductive' in Lukumí religion. The denigration of the Oshún Pasanga was through Roman Catholic iconography and Spanish language translation to *La Santa Puta* or *La Puta Santa* (Cabrera, 2023: 117; Brown, 2003: 358), and in the earlier referenced translation of Oshún as a 'prostitute' (Borelli, 2014: 72). Lukumí Priestess and scholar Luisah Teish expounds that 'because of western eros phobia and the Madonna-Whore complex, Oshún's image has suffered. Today in Cuba she is referred to as *La Puta Santa* ("the Whore Saint") and is envisioned as a prostitute of interracial ancestry' (Teish, 2024: 20).

That said, in Lukumí religion, Oshún is referenced as *La Santa Puta* only in the Spanish translation but the true meaning in Lukumí is still as 'Divine Courtesan' even when *La Santa Puta* is used in patakís (Cabrera, 2023: 117). However, the meaning in Lukumí of 'Oshún as Divine Courtesan' is always sex positive, signifying personhood and sexual and erotic empowerment. Sigmund Freud theorized the "Madonna-Whore complex" in the early 1900s as a psychoanalytic construct within Christian iconography where the Roman Catholic figure of Madonna (Virgin Mary) is virginal, chaste, and pure; as opposed to the figure of the 'Whore' who is promiscuous, a 'slut', and 'impure' (Kelly and Hahn, 2020: 129). The Madonna-Whore complex is then the *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* as the Madonna in binary with Oshún Pasanga as Whore, like two sides of a coin (Teish, 2024: 20). The Madonna-Whore complex further controls Black women's sexuality perceived as promiscuous, and in regulating Oshún's sexual autonomy. Oshún's fluid sexuality with numerous lovers and erotic energies are outside the bounds of imperial white patriarchy and Black heteropatriarchy. Alexander explains how sexual and erotic autonomy are the 'outlaw' in 'white imperial heteropatriarchy' and later adopted in Black heteropatriarchy against the figures of the 'prostitute' and 'lesbian' (2005: 23). So, when Rodriguez's 'Oshún's Dance from Cuba' is put in conversation with complex codes of *La Santa Puta*, Oshún-as-performance reflects the ultimate Black femme, representing Black women's sexual agency, race and skin colour through the life force of the Oshún sacred dance, outside of the bounds of colonial heteropatriarchy. Rodriguez's dance piece, 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba' is the embodiment of a race-sexuality-gender matrix in the image of Oshún as *La Mulata*.

Act IV. Oshún-as-Performance in Nineteenth century Quadroon Balls, Brown Girls Balls in Kingston, Jamaica, and *Bailes de Cuna* in Havana, Cuba

Lukumí elders, through their great wisdom in patakís, have always interpreted Oshún as *La Mulata* in the nineteenth century in forced sexual arrangements to sustain the libidinal economy during enslavement (Alvarado, 2025, pp. 34-35). Owens discusses that in nineteenth century New Orleans, Louisiana, slave owners could sell their enslaved women as *statu liber*, which was a time-bound contract to fulfil forced sex labour as a brothel prostitute to pay for their freedom (2017: 180). In addition, New Orleans was known for being the largest in slave trading in the United States. It was famous for its “fancy trade” of light-skinned Black women known as “fancies,” considered ‘too delicate’ for hard labour in cotton fields, thereby sold as sex slaves (Landau, 2013: 51). According to the well-known patakí,

Oshún was forced into prostitution in order to feed her children. The other orishas did not approve of her behavior and took her children, which left her in utter despair. She wore the same white dress everyday until it eventually turned yellow because of all the tears she cried. She went to the river and began washing her dress. Another river orisha called Aje'-Shaluga fell in love with her as he watched her washing her dress. [S/He] gave her some money and jewelry that [s/he] collected from the bottom of the river where [s/he] lived. Oshún used these items to free her children, and ultimately married Aje'-Shaluga (Alvarado, 2025, pp. 34-35).

In this patakí Oshún originally wore a white dress that turned yellow from her tears. I interpret this patakí as the historical entanglement of sex slavery in the libidinal economy solely dependent on the exploitation of Oshún and her children (the enslaved Africans). Rodriguez's ‘Oshún Dance from Cuba’ signifies prophetic gestures and embodied knowledge of this phase of sexual exploitation within racialised colonial heteropatriarchy through masquerade balls. My argument here is how Oshún's patakí of ‘forced prostitution’ can be reinterpreted as a performance historiography of Black women's experiences through sexually coercive systems in masquerade balls and ritualized ballroom dances for sexual contracts and arrangements.

By the late eighteenth century, masquerade balls were all the rage as spectacular and transactional events for Brown women to enter *plaçage* in Spanish and French colonies, and concubinage in British colonies (Borelli, 2014: 67). Concubinage and *plaçage* (French for “placement”) were historical common-law “marriages” between white men and selected Brown women in libidinal economies during slavery in ‘the New World libidinal economy’ (Borelli, 2014: 67). Oshún-as-performance manifested in the spectacle of brown skin in Jamaica emerged in the

late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century with the "balls at Kingston to the 'Brown Girls'" (Lewis 382), instituted by the British Royal Navy after the victory in the Battle of Saintes, led by Admiral Sir George Rodney, lasting four days from 9-12 April 1782, just off the coast of Dominica (Lewis, 1834: 382; Hill 1992: 238-239). **Figure 5** shows William Holland's 1802 'A Grand Jamaica Ball!' in nineteenth century Jamaica was indicative of a Brown Girls Ball showing varying complexions of the women and other dark-skinned people. In Jamaica, Oshún as *La Mulata* appeared as 'Brown Girls' sometimes referred to as 'mulatto women' or *mulatress*, infantilised as "girls," who were offsprings of Europeans and enslaved Africans. Brown women were considered the 'fair sex' by Eurocentric standards, known for their beauty, elegance, and stateliness (Lewis, 1834: 382). From the early nineteenth century, women from the Brown Girls Balls started going out into the Kingston streets in processional 'sets' of skin colour by the shade of skin, costumed in matching dresses and parasols as they danced and sang through the streets, sponsored now by white women, the wives of planters, and who also owned enslaved people (Forbes-Erickson, 2021: 12). The skin colour sets were coerced to competitively dance, sing, and go from house to house in masquerade and revelry. Later, the Set Girls parades joined annual John Canoe masquerades that derived from the earliest sighting of a West African masquerade in seventeenth century Jamaica, anglicized as John Canoe. These events were British sponsored with Shakespearean skits, Morris dancing, and mummery, and celebrated from Christmas to the New Year when enslaved people were given time off during the harvest season (Forbes-Erickson 2021: 12).



Figure 5. Holland, William. ‘A Grand Jamaica Ball! or the Creole hop a la muftee; as exhibited (sic) in Spanish Town.’ 1802. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. Available at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/94501549/>. (Accessed 18 July 2018).

Oshún-as-performance appeared again in the Quadroon balls of New Orleans that originated in the *redoutes des filles de couleur* (‘balls (or assemblies) for free women/girls of color’) in Cap-Français, the capital city of the French colony of Saint Dominigue (present day Haiti) in the late 1700s (Burnard and Garrigus, 2016: 78). Wealthy white men selected “free women/girls of colour” or “[Mulata] Courtesans” in these masquerade balls (Burnard and Garrigus, 2016: 78). When the Haitian Revolution broke out in 1791 in Saint-Domingue, refugees settled in New Orleans from 1791 to 1809, carrying the practice of *plaçage* and balls, later formalising Quadroon and Octoroon balls (Clark, 2013: 159). Over time, light-skinned Black attendees at Quadroon and Octoroon balls gradually became lighter in complexion that they appeared as white (Landau, 2013: 63), synonymous with Oshún’s transformation as *La Mulata* that became the umbrella term for light-skinned Black women of European and African ancestry. **Figure 6** shows an 1844 advertisement in *The Times-Picayune*, for Grand Dress and Masquerade Balls on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays, with Sundays reserved for Quadroon Balls. Oshun as *La Mulata* appears in the Quadroon Ball as an interpretive device and encoded in Oshun’s dance.

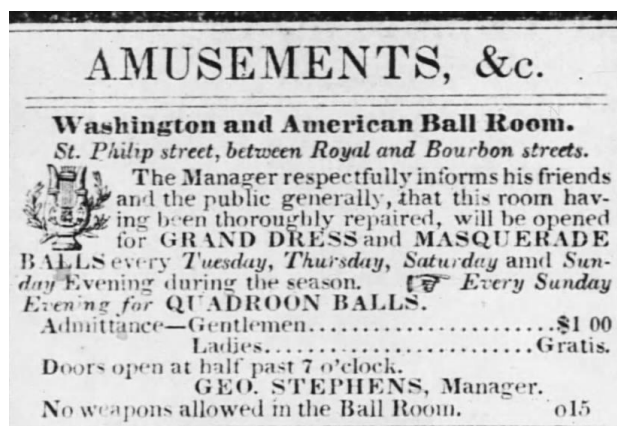


Figure 6. A Quadroon Ball Advertisement, *The Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, Louisiana, Tuesday, December 31, 1844: 3

In nineteenth century Cuba, *Bailes de Cuna* ('cradle dances' - 'melting pot of creoleness'), were elegant social dance events or balls that featured beautifully dressed young mulatas who would attend in hopes of being selected as a 'mulata mistress' as sex slaves for eligible white men in a 'dressed-up, fancy version of the auction block' (Borelli, 2014: 67). Again, Oshún-as-performance manifested in *Bailes de Cuna* as dynamic spaces for racial and social selections, displays of power, spectacles of mixed-race Black women, skin colours, and sexual coercion just like the Quadroon Balls in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Brown Girls Balls in Kingston, Jamaica during this period. Borelli notes that

Caramel-skinned, honey-coloured, tawny, and/or tanned, the *mûlatresse* [Brown woman] populated these social-dance events set up as erotic entertainments for their display and exchange among imperial [white] men with capital. The incentives and goals were the same: to parade mulaticized flesh for plaçage in a more relaxed and less socially constricted environment than the exclusively white balls (2014, 68).

White women were not present at any of these balls for contractual arrangements and purchases of mulata mistresses, plaçees, or concubines. White women were reserved for reproducing white heirs, and expected to be chaste, pure. Owens contends that 'when sex is understood as a transaction, women are responsible for their own violation' (2023: 157). Furthermore, I suggest that no act was considered a 'violation' since Black women lacked the agency to consent when they were owned and controlled. Contractual sex was bound up in the intricacies of formal European dance, a ritualized choreography of power, control, and submission of mulatas in spoken and unspoken rules.

In general, nineteenth century balls (Quadroon Balls, Brown Girls Balls, and *Bailes de Cuna*) in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean emerged from formal European dances like the waltz where couples would revolve around the dance floor; the quadrille, a square dance for four couples with intricate dance patterns with feet and hands; and the cotillion, a square dance with a caller giving dance directions to couples, and with a promenade, which included couples joining hands and walking together across the dance floor featuring a side-by-side V-shape with heads turned, moving in a leisurely, flowing manner (Manuel 2009: 9; Bilby and Neely, 2009: 236). However, the Cuban contradanza emerged as a series of ballroom dances between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Cuba, developing a later dance called the habanera, a unique Havana dance form in contradanza (Manuel, 2009: 62). The danzón, followed by the mambo, and the cha-cha-cha developed from the habanera (Manuel, 2009: 62). Borelli describes contradanza as a 'syncopated version of European country dance' (2014: 77). Syncopation is the distinctive beats often associated with a mix of African rhythms in European melodies featuring accent beats and bounces.

A unique form of the contradanza genre emerged around 1850 called the '*La Mulata*' with a distinctive syncopation called '*sesquíáltera*' with 6/8, 2/4, and 3/4 rhythms (Díaz and Manuel, 2009, 123-124). Through the epiphany of patakís, Oshún as *La Mulata* reappears in the sonic sounds of contradanza music '*La Mulata*', popularized in mid-nineteenth century Cuba much like the interracial mixing of African and European ancestry in the libidinal economy that maintained power structures in the race-sexuality-gender matrix. Contradanza music was accompanied by the tantalizing hip movements of Oshún in 'the art of turning her hips acrobatically' and in 'acts of sex, labour, mobilization, pleasure and dance' (quoted in Borelli, 2014: 65). Along with the sensual hip movement, Borelli describes the quickened footsteps in the contradanza performed by couples of white men and mulatas. White Cuban novelist Cirilo Vilaverde (1812-1894) described the nineteenth century contradanza in his novel, *Cecilia Valdez* (1839):

The feet moved incessantly as they were softly dragged to the rhythm of the music, the dancers mixed and pressed in the midst of a packed crowd of onlookers, as they moved up and down the dance floor without break or pause. Even above the deafening noise above the kettledrums, in perfect rhythm with the music, the monotonous and continuous swish sound made by the feet could be heard (quoted in Borelli, 2014: 76).

From a nineteenth century white colonial perspective, Vilaverde observed the cacophony of 'deafening noise' in the sonic contradanza with white and mulata bodies, 'mixed and pressed' together in what appeared to be a sexually charged and sensual dance.

Masquerade ballroom dances were integral to rituals of coerced sex, power, and control of mulatas with the façade in the proximity to white femininity. Libidinal systems of concubinage, plaçage, and mulata mistresses across the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean collapsed at the end of enslavement in the mid- to late nineteenth century, and former concubines, plaçees, and mistresses fell into poverty, turned to sex work and were further sex-trafficked into forced prostitution that led to their certain demise as tragic mulatas (Alvarado, 2025, pp. 34-35; Landau, 2013: 51; D'Alessandro, 2022: 145). Many former concubines, plaçees and their descendants established brothels exclusively for white men, continuing the libidinal economy from the nineteenth century well into the twentieth century with the likes of a light-skinned Black woman, Madam Lulu White (1868-1931) (**Figure 7**), self-proclaimed as "the famous West Indian Octoroon" in New Orleans, Louisiana (Landau, 2013: 58; Hemphill 2024: 153). Madam Lulu White established the brothel, "Mahogany Hall" in Storyville, New Orleans, a town named after city alderman Sidney Story who legalised prostitution to control and contain light skinned Black women sex workers to one district that became known as the "red light district" from 1897 to 1917. The term, "red light" emerged in Storyville probably from railroad workers who carried lamps at night leaving them on the porches of prostitute houses they were visiting or from prostitutes leaving lamps in the windows of brothels that lit the entire district streets with the warm reddish glow of the lights, indicative of brothels open for business (Hemphill 2024: 153). Then there was 'Nellie's Brothel' (1930-1990), established by a light-skinned Black woman, Madam Nellie Jackson in Natchez, Mississippi exclusively for white men (Broom, 2019). Madam Nellie Jackson is significant as the great aunt of Black American playwright Dominique Morriseau of Haitian and African American descent, who wrote the play, *Follow Me to Nellie's*, produced in 2011 and published in 2022 to honour her great aunt's memory (Morriseau, 2022).



Figure 7. Photograph of Madam Lulu White (1868-1931)
*Lulu White, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans Jazz Museum
Collection.*

Available at: <https://www.messynessychic.com/2022/03/09/lulu-whiteand-her-belle-epoque-palace-of-interracial-sex-work/> (Accessed: 15 September 2024)

Act V. Conclusion

When Oshún travelled with Africans across the seas to Cuba, she asked Yemaya to transform her into the figure of *La Mulata* with light skin and straight hair so that all Cubans could see themselves in her. Through the transatlantic journey through time and space, Oshún as *La Mulata*, the ‘Divine Courtesan’ was denigrated to *La Santa Puta* (‘The Holy Whore’) and syncretized in Roman Catholic iconography as *La Virgen de La Caridad del Cobre* (The Virgin of Charity of El Cobre) (Teish, 2024: 20). Ultimately, Oshún manifests as *Oshún Pasanga* (Oshún as “Divine Courtesan”), erotic power and sexual liberation, and counters nineteenth century colonial representations of *La Mulata* in the interlocking systems of race, gender, and sexual identities. Oshún-as-performance appeared in Rodríguez’s artistic

Yusimi Moya Rodriguez's 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba'

dance piece, 'Orisha Dance from Cuba' (2017) in conversation in nineteenth century masquerade balls across the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean, claiming spaces in the Brown Girls Balls in Kingston, Jamaica, the Quadroon balls in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Bailes de Cuna in Havana, Cuba as rogue, not tragic. Oshún as the 'Divine Courtesan' counters the stereotype of the tragic mulata, resuscitating Oshún's sacred sensuality, desire, and sexual empowerment in a revised performance historiography and embodied knowledge in dance forms.

What emerges from Rodriguez's choreography is Oshún in the image of *La Mulata*, by de facto, representing all people, "regardless of the colour of their skin" spreading Lukumí throughout the world, shifting colonial narratives to the erotic power in Oshún's sacred dance and patakis that foretold the many paths of Black women's lived experiences in the New World. Oshún's dance carries the weight of a complex history and the liberation that many share in Oshún's sexual power. It is no wonder that many Lukumí devotees today, and even the uninitiated (*aleyos*) have found solace in the avatar of Oshún Pasanga and other Orishas in Lukumí through Orisha dances in African Caribbean folk performance and sacred rituals as creation and life. Many Lukumí Olorishas and practitioners across the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean will spend years, if not decades, perfecting Orisha dances like Oshún sacred dance, attesting to her tremendous spiritual blessings through dance (Dorsey 2020: 40). Oshún dance fosters a sense of belonging and shared experience 'helping to heal individual and collective wounds' (Tcheuffa, 2025: 88). Rodriguez in the artistic dance, 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba' tells the story of Black women's experiences, of resistance to colonial stereotypes so interlocked, and protects Black women and all people. When Rodriguez performs 'Oshún Dance from Cuba' (2017), she dances through time and space as Oshún herself personified in artistic form, simultaneously activating portals of sacred personhood and self-actualization through dance.

Oore yeye ooo Osun!

(Greeting the Mother's kindness).

Song: 'Chant to Oshún'

Ay ye ye, ay ye ye Ma Mai Oshún

(Ay mother, Ay mother, Mother Oshún)

Ay ye ye, ay ye ye Ma Mai Oshún

(Ay mother, Ay mother, Mother Oshún)

Ay ye ye Ma Mai Oshún, Ay ye ye Oshún mare

(Ay mother, Mother Oshún, Oshún welcome)

Ay ye ye Ma Mai Oshún, Ay ye ye Oshún mare

D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson

(Ay mother, Mother Oshún, Oshún welcome)

(Public Domain - <https://heatherhoustonmusic.com/song/chant-to-Oshún/>)

Reference List

- Alejandro, R. (2012) *Ochun Panchagara*. Available at: <https://www.artelista.com/obra/7211322522285747-ochun-panchagara.html> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).
- Alvarado, D. (2025) *The Voodoo Hoodoo Spellbook*. San Francisco: Weiser Books
- Benítez-Rojo, A. (1996) *Repeating Islands: The Caribbean and The Postmodern Perspectives*, 2nd edn. Translated from the Spanish by James E. Maraniss. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berg, S. (2023) *Yoruba Mythology: Orisha Gods and Goddesses of West Africa*. Medley: Creek Ridge Publishing.
- Bertrand, A., and Bertrand, S. (2017) *Womb Awakening: Initiatory Wisdom from the Creatrix of Life* [Online]. Rochester: Bear and Company. Available at: <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/womb-awakening-azra-bertrand-md/1124650952?ean=9781591432807>
- Blay, Y. (2011) 'Skin Bleaching and Global White Supremacy: By Way of Introduction'. *The Journal of Pan-African Studies* (4) 4, pp. 4-46.
- Boucicault, D. (1861) *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana: A Play in Five Acts*. New York. Samuel French.
- Bolens, G. (2011) 'Arms Akimbo: Kinesic Analysis in Visual and Verbal Art', in Atzmon, L. (ed.) *Visual Rhetoric and The Eloquence of Design*. Anderson, South Carolina: Parlor Press, pp. 167-204.
- Borelli, M. (2010) 'Hips, Hip-Notism, Hip (G) Nosis: The Mulata Performances of Ninón Sevilla', in Carter, A. and O'Shea, J. (eds.) *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, pp. 122-132.
- Borelli, M. (2014) 'Undoing the Tragic Mulata', in DeFrantz, F. and Gonzalez, A. (eds.) *Black Performance Theory*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 63-86.
- Brown, D. (2003) *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in An Afro-Cuban Religion*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.
- Broom, Brian (2019) "'She will always be a legend around here,'" The Life of Mississippi Madam Nellie Jackson'. *Clarion Ledger*. Available at: <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/magnolia/2019/11/13/natchez-mississippi-brothel-owner-nellie-jackson-mississippi-madam/4164682002/> (Accessed: 30 November 2025).

Yusimi Moya Rodriguez's 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba'

- Burnard, T. and Garrigus, J. (2016) *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in the French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Carbonera, G. (2025) "The Africanness of Dance in Cuba," in Sloat, S. (ed.) *Making Caribbean Dance: Continuity and Creativity in Island Cultures*. Gainesville: University of Florida, pp. 62-66.
- Child, L. (1842) *The Quadroon*. New York: The Liberty Bell.
- Clark, E. (2013) *The Strange History of The American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in The Revolutionary Atlantic World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Clark, M. A. (2007) *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering The Realities of a Growing Religion*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers.
- Connor, R. and Sparks, D. (2004) *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- D'Alessandro, Michael (2022) *Staged Readings: Contesting Class in Popular American Theatre and Literature, 1835-1875*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- De La Torre, M. (2004) *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- DiazCasas, R. (2023) 'In Praise of the Senses: Ramón Alejandro's Journey to Self'. *No Country Magazine*. Available at: <https://nocountrymagazine.com/in-praise-of-the-senses-ramon-alejandros-journey-into-self/> (Accessed: 20 November 2025).
- Diaz, E. and Manuel: (2009) 'Puerto Rico: The Rise and Fall of Danza as National Music', in Manuel P. (ed.) *Creolizing Contradance in the Caribbean*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, pp. 113-154.
- Dominguez, R. (2021) *Yoruba Gods*. Boston: AdmitHub Ref Service Press
- Dorsey, Lilith. (2020) *Orishas, Goddesses, and Voodoo Queens: The Divine Feminine*. Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books.
- Espino, H. (2017) Lukumí Patakí, Translated from Lukumí by Olivia Smith, in Smith, O. "31 Days of Revolutionary Women, #16: Oshún." *South Seattle Emerald*. Available at: <https://southseattleemerald.org/people/2017/03/16/31-days-of-revolutionary-women-16-Oshún#:~:text=Nearby%2C%20Oshún%20had%20been%20listening,goddess%20of%20the%20religion%20Santera> (Accessed: 25 October 2025).
- Espino, H. (2010) *La Venus Lukumí: Oshún La Diosa de Oshogbo*. Santiago de Cuba: Centro Cultural Afrocubano de Occidente
- Felder, G. (2025) *The Five Blessings of Ifa: Reclaiming Black Futures Through Afro-Indigenous Spirituality*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson

- Forbes-Erickson, D. (2021) 'Balls at Kingston to the 'Brown Girls': A Palimpsest for Bleached Brown Skins in Jamaican Dancehall', *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* (17) 1, pp. 1-32. DOI: 10.33596/anth.368
- Fuhrman, A., Uytterhoeven, L. and Fensham, R. (2025) 'Movement Analysis', in Nibbelink, L. and Karreman, L. (eds.) *Performance Research Methods: Interdisciplinary Methods for Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, pp. 85-106.
- Gonzalez-Wippler, M. (1992) *Powers of The Orisha: Santeria and The Worship of Saints*. New York: Original Publications.
- Isinyemeze, Ayo (2022) *Olukumí: The Delta People of Yoruba Extraction*. Available at <https://www.yorubaness.com.ng/2022/06/oLukumí-delta-people-of-yoruba.html> (Accessed: 27 October 2025).
- Jackson, G. (2020) *Put Your Hand on Your Hips and Act Like a Woman: Black History and Poetics in Performance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Karade, Baba Ifa (2020) *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*. York Beach, Maine: Weiser Books.
- Kelly, C. and Hahn, C. (2020) *Clinical Psychology*. Essex: ED-Tech Press.
- Landau, E. (2013) *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville*. New Orleans: Louisiana State University Press.
- Lele, Ocha'ni. (2011) *Diloggún Tales of The Natural World: How The Moon Fooled The Sun and Other Santería Stories*. Rochester Books: Destiny Books.
- Lewin, Olive (1968) 'Jamaican Folk Music', in *Caribbean Quarterly*, (14) 1-2, pp. 49-56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.1968.11828977>
- Lewis, M. (1834) 'Journal of a West India Proprietor', in *The Quarterly Review*, (L), John Murray, Ablemarle Street, pp. 374-398.
- Lytard, Jean-Francois (1993) *Libidinal Economy* (Iain Hamilton Grant, Trans.). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Manuel: (2009) 'Cuba: From Contradanza to Danzon', in Manuel P. (ed.) *Creolizing Contradance in the Caribbean*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, pp. 51-112.
- Morriseau, D. (2022) *Follow me to Nellie's*. New York: Concord Theatricals.
- Murell, N. (2010) *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Murphy, J. (2011) *Santeria: African Spirits in America*. Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
- Nudson, R. (2021) *All Made Up: The Power and Pitfalls of Beauty Culture, From Cleopatra to Kim Kardashian*. Boston: Beacon Press Books.
- Olmos, M. and Paravisini-Gebert, L. (2022) *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: From Voudou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo – An Introduction*. 3rd edn. New York: New York University Press.
- Owens, E. (2023) *In the Presence of Force: Sexual Violence and Black Women's Survival in Antebellum New Orleans*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press.

Yusimi Moya Rodriguez's 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba'

- Owens, E. (2017) 'Promises: Sexual Labor in the Spaces Between Slavery and Freedom'. *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*. (8) 2, pp. 179-216.
- Perez, E. (2010) 'The Virgin in the Mirror: Reading Images of a Black Madonna Through the Lens of Afro-Cuban Women's Experiences', in *The Journal of African American History*. (95) 2, pp. 202-228.
- Price, I. (2022) *Goddess Power: Awakening the Wisdom of the Divine Feminine in Your Life*. Coral Gables: Mango Publishing Group.
- Rodriguez, Y. (2017) 'Orisha Oshún Dance from Cuba'. Yusimi Moya Rodriguez. Available at: <https://www.cubancontemporary.com/projects/dancevideos2017> (Accessed: 15 September 2024)
- Senior, O. (1985) *A-Z of Jamaican Heritage*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books (Caribbean) Limited.
- Siedlak, M. (2018) *Lucumi: The Ways of Santería*. St. Augustine, Florida: Oshún Publications
- Smith, O. (2017) "31 Days of Revolutionary Women, #16: Oshún." *South Seattle Emerald*. Available at: <https://southseattleemerald.org/people/2017/03/16/31-days-of-revolutionary-women-16>
[Oshún#:~:text=Nearby%2C%20Oshún%20had%20been%20listening,goddess%20of%20the%20religion%20Santera](https://southseattleemerald.org/people/2017/03/16/31-days-of-revolutionary-women-16). (Accessed: 27 October 2025)
- Sobrinho, G. and Da Silva, N. (2023) 'The Yoruba Pedosphere: The Tale of Onilé', in Patzel, N., Grunwald, S., Brevik, E., and Feller, C. (eds.) *Cultural Understanding of Soils: The Importance of Cultural Diversity and of the Inner World*. Cham: Springer. pp. 208-224.
- Spence-Adofo, V. (2024). 'Dance, Healing, Sexual Energy and Creativity', in *Ancestral Voices*. Retrieved from <https://ancestralvoices.co.uk/dance-healing-sexual-energy-creativity/> (Accessed: 25 July 2025).
- Teish, L. (2024) *Jump Up: Good Times Throughout the Seasons with Celebrations from Around the World*. Miami, Florida: Conari Press.
- Thompson, R. (2001) "Orchestrating Water and the Wind," in Murphy J. and Sanford, M (eds.) *Osun Across The Waters: Yoruba Goddess in Africa and The Americas*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 251-262.
- Walker, S. (2001) 'Everyday Africa in New Jersey: Wonderings and Wanderings in the African Diaspora', in Walker, S. (ed.) *African Roots/American cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, pp. 45-80.
- Whately, S. (2025) 'Dance Analysis', in Nibbelink, L. and Karreman, L. (eds.) *Performance Research Methods: Interdisciplinary Methods for Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, pp. 107-124.
- Vega, M. (2000) *The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santería*. New York: Ballantine Books.