

Entangled Rhythms on a Conflicted Island: Digging up the Buried Histories of Dominican Folk Music

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Abstract

The ongoing human rights crisis in the Dominican Republic has made it abundantly clear that *antihaitianismo* lives on in the island of Quisqueya. While most Dominican histories date such sentiments back to the 1822-44 Haitian “occupation” of the eastern part of the island, evidence seems rather to indicate that coexistence was relatively peaceful up until the Trujillo dictatorship (1930-1961). Over three decades, Trujillo institutionalized anti-haitianism and the *merengue* as key components of Dominican nationalism. Evidence of cross-border musical and cultural exchanges with Haiti were thus written out of the histories of merengue beginning to proliferate at the time. Today, as tens of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent are denied their fundamental rights, it is clear that such rhetorical moves have real effects. Rectifying the situation will require huge cultural changes, including the writing of histories that emphasize similarities and the shared humanity of both populations. This paper is such an exercise in activist historical ethnomusicology. As such, I analyze the myths surrounding the early history of *merengue* and *pambiche* rhythm, examine historical documents to uncover alternative histories, and present evidence supporting the entanglement of musical practices of Haiti and Dominican Republic before and during Trujillo’s time.

Keywords: Racism, nationalism, Dominican Republic, musicology, *antihaitianismo*, rhythm.

Over the past year, the world’s eyes have been turned on the Dominican Republic perhaps more than at any other time in recent memory. The world seems united in condemning the actions of its government, which in 2013 rendered hundreds of thousands of people of Haitian descent stateless, even though many had been born and raised in the Dominican Republic, and in 2015 began expelling those without the desired papers. Yet Dominican coverage of these events differs sharply from international coverage: local newspapers speak only of “alleged” human rights violations and use the term “deportation” only in quotations. Many Dominicans contribute to the discourse through xenophobic videos, cartoons, and articles circulating on social media, as well as through actual, physical violence.

Putting this discourse into historical perspective can do a great deal to unravel the labyrinthine rhetorics of the present crisis. In particular, because music and dance have always played important roles in discussions about Dominican identity, musical history can help illuminate the roots of this crisis, while also pointing the way towards a more peaceful coexistence. In this article, I aim to contribute to this project by putting my own re-readings of well-known Dominican musical literature into dialogue with a musico-cultural analysis of a specific rhythm in the *merengue típico* repertoire, the *pambiche*, and with recent historiography more generally. Through these measures, I shall explore how and why certain myths about merengue

continue to circulate and I will demonstrate the entanglement of Haitian and Dominican musical practices throughout their histories. Recognizing and valuing such entanglements can, in turn, help to unearth a less exclusionary Dominican identity.

Roots of the crisis: National mythologies and their discontents

A convenient narrative exists to explain why the current crisis has occurred. As the story goes, Dominicans have resented their neighbors ever since Haitians occupied their country and ruled over it from 1822 to 1844. (The Dominican Republic is the only country in the hemisphere to celebrate independence not from a European power, but from an American neighbor.) According to this story, political domination combined with insurmountable cultural differences created a situation of mutual mistrust and even hatred that has endured for almost two centuries, and culminated in the 1937 massacre discussed further below. The story's general outline does indeed crop up frequently in journalistic treatments of the present crisis, but they can also be found in musical historiography. For instance, it has often been asserted that merengue, generally considered *the* Dominican national music, literally began on the battlefields of the war leading to Dominican independence from Haiti (see Austerlitz 1996, 1). From this origin myth, it follows that dancing merengue is a patriotic act. The music serves to separate Dominican and Haitian cultures, just as the war separated the two countries politically.

However, since the 1970s, new generations of historiographers have repeatedly and convincingly shown that this version of Dominican history is untrue. Instead, it was the creation of propagandists from the time of the dictator Rafael Trujillo (ruled 1930-1961) who worked hard to cover up the fact that Haitians and Dominicans share a great deal of culture. While traditional Dominican histories emphasize Haitian war crimes and the unpopularity of measures like introducing French into schools as evidence of the resentment of Haitian rulers, recent historians have demonstrated that not only did Dominicans and Haitians peacefully coexist in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but in fact the unification of the island was a move welcomed by many on the Spanish-speaking side (Eller 2011, 112). Yale historian Anne Eller has shown that no clear idea of "Dominicans" existed in 1844, so that inhabitants of the new nation were referred to variously as "Spanish-Haitians", as "not Spanish nor French nor Haitian", or as "Spanish Dominicans" (2014, 92). Neither Haiti nor the Dominican Republic were consistently recognized by other countries until the 1860s. Nonetheless, the twentieth-century propagandists propagated their revised version of island history both through conventional forms of publication and indoctrination, especially in schools, and even actual, physical destruction of documents (Eller 2011, 140). The construction of a Dominican identity by elites inside the country goes yet further back; systematic exclusion of African heritage and Haitian ties began with Manuel de Jesús Galván's 1879 *Enriquillo*, a romantic nationalist novel that tied Dominicaness to the Taíno people, and condemnation of Dominicans employing Haitian cultural practices dates at least to the 1890s Santiago poet Juan Antonio Alix. His *décimas* decried practices like "judú dances", which he saw as evidence of a Haitian cultural encroachment that threatened Dominican national identity.¹

1. This means of forging a national history – by emphasizing the importance of one's own nation through contrast with others – was clearly a common process in the nineteenth century, and frequently had racial overtones in Europe and the Americas.

As for political history, so for early Dominican musicology. While numerous pages were devoted to framing the Taíno “*areíto*” as the beginning of “Dominican music”, evidence of cross-border musical exchanges and musical culture shared with Haiti were systematically written out of the histories of Dominican folk music – but not until relatively late. Incipient arguments tying the Dominican nation and its history to (Hispanic) music, dance, and instruments appeared in Alix’s aforementioned late-nineteenth-century *costumbrista* poems, but did not become prevalent until as late as the 1920s. Nor was any concern ever expressed over Haitian influence on Dominican musical culture until that point (Haiti may rather have been seen as a modernizing influence). In fact, it is interesting to note that in a poem by Alix that pits the newfangled accordion against the traditional *tiple*, the latter describes itself as “Boyé” – referencing Haitian president Boyer – to show its deeper roots in the island’s culture.

Merengue, mangulina, and Dominican independence

Uncovering this kind of evidence of shared history and culture predating later separationist narratives is not simply an intellectual exercise but an urgent matter in the current political context. Doing so will show the contributions that Afro-Dominicans, including those of Haitian descent, have made to beloved symbols of Dominican national culture; it also will demonstrate the exchange and tolerance that has often existed between the populations, especially in the borderlands, and can even provide a model for a kinder, gentler Dominican national identity. Because of merengue’s symbolic weight, the first step in such a project must be a reevaluation of the hoary myths that continually circulate about this Dominican “national music”.

The first mention of merengue on the island of Quisqueya is from an 1854 article in the Santo Domingo newspaper *El Oasis*, which roundly condemned the dance’s movements, as did a whole series of articles to follow. It appears to have emerged out of the *danza* then practiced around the Caribbean but especially in Puerto Rico, a frequent partner in interisland musical exchanges, as much then as it is now. There too, the merengue was censured as a lower-class version of the statelier *danza*. Both merengue and *danza* were new innovations at the time, with their closed-position choreography for the dancing couple. They displaced earlier popular dances like the Dominican *tumba*, a member of the contradance family in which dancers switched partners while performing figures in straight lines or squares, which was considered the “national dance” of its time.

Its later dominance of the discourse can easily make us forget that merengue was not the only “new” couple dance to emerge in the Dominican Republic at the time and displace local contradance forms. As merengue gradually cemented its ties with the northern Cibao region, a different dance took precedence in the South: the graceful *mangulina*. Today performed in a quick 6/8 meter, it was and is often paired with the *carabiné*, which has contradance-like choreography in the Dominican Republic, and with the waltz. *Mangulina* and *carabiné*, or mangouline and carabinier, both existed in Haiti as well, though the latter was performed there as a couple dance. Conventional mythology traces the origin of *carabiné* to Haitian soldiers dancing with carbines slung over their shoulders around 1805, the first period of Haitian dominance in the eastern part of the island.

Mangulina and carabiné both outlived the displaced tumba. In 1925, in the southwestern mountain town of San Juan de la Maguana, they were still always danced as a set: carabiné² in the round, mangulina more like the danza, which itself was usually performed after the vals (Rodríguez Demorizi 1971, 83). In their form and sequence these two-dance sets echo the structure and meaning of other Dominican folk expressions, in that the first dance in each pair is based on European models and the second is an African-influenced, creolized Caribbean expression – much like the structure of Afro-Dominican rituals or of merengue itself (see Davis 2003). And although today mangulina is thought of as southern, it was long practiced in the north, too, alongside merengue. For instance, I have been unable to find any poem by Alix that mentions merengue, but one – dated 1895 – does mention mangulina being played at a celebration in Santiago, now considered merengue cibaëño's home base.

While today a consensus has settled on mangulina's proper meter being 6/8, it was once played in a much more rhythmically complex way – perhaps resembling the pambiche, discussed further below, or the "rhythmic irregularity" of early danza, in the words of Trujillera musicologist Flérida de Nolasco (1939, 68-69). A 1942 book by composer Enrique de Marchena suggests that mangulina's "curious" rhythm should be notated in 5/4 or 5/8 (1942, 40), an odd notion given its duple feel. Nonetheless, the strange time signature matches with contemporary Haitian notions about the equally curious rhythm of merengue (Largey 2009, 224-225) – perhaps suggesting a cross-border exchange of ideas.³

All this might seem somewhat of a digression from the topic of merengue, yet it is important to consider merengue's others – the mangulina, in particular, and the carabiné, by association – when pondering the emergence of merengue in the 1850s and its nationalization in the 1930s. While today the dances are considered two separate forms, with merengue in 2/4 and mangulina in 6/8, the metric and generic distinctions were not always clear in the nineteenth century – nor are they always clear today. Musician Rafael Damirón (in Marchena 1942, 42) even posited that merengue developed out of the mangulina, which at times was considered a better national symbol. The first national anthem, by Juan Batista Alfonseca, was supposedly a mangulina (Nolasco 1948, 126); and in 1929, folklorist Esteban Peña Morell proposed that it, not merengue, should be the national dance – because he believed merengue was too closely tied to Haiti (Austerlitz 1996, 2-3). As late as 1947, musician Porfirio Golibart González reverently referred to mangulina as the "heart and soul of our Independence", for – he says – it was played to accompany General (later President/Dictator) Santana in his battles against Haitian forces (29). Yet the habitual pairing of the carabiné, considered a Haitian import, with the mangulina, considered a patriotic opponent of Haitians, was never posited as ideologically problematic.⁴ Such facts belie the notion that Dominicans have always or unequivocally been culturally and ideologically anti-Haitian.

2. Though carabiné was more often called "ron", probably not referring to rum (*romo*, in Dominican slang) but rather to the fact that it was danced in the round, *ronda*, with a leader "singing" out the steps – much as in modern Cuban *rueda* (V́ctor Garrido in Rodríguez Demorizi 1971, 83).

3. Trying to notate performances of pambiche brings home the complexity of these rhythms. The particular "swing" seminal accordionist Tatico Henríquez puts on the pambiche's triplet-like figures could either be written as an eighth-note triplet in which the first is slightly elongated, or as an eighth-and-two-sixteenths figure with the eighth slightly shortened. Such rhythms push the limits of Western notation and recall, not coincidentally, the "swing triplet" of jazz – and the debates over its length and notation (Benadon 2006).

4. Interestingly, as *tamborero* Ray "Chino" Díaz pointed out to me, the much-maligned *maco* tambora rhythm of modern-style merengue closely resembles the *carabiné*.

Merengue's own origins are hazy (in part because defining it remains a problem), though most scholars today believe it was first played in either Puerto Rico or Cuba. Still, generations of Haitian and Dominican scholars have argued over which of their countries is the true source of the rhythm. I am not concerned with establishing a point of origin, but rather with analyzing these arguments and their history as evidence for the creation of *antihaitianismo* through musicological work. Dominicans have based their rejection of the Haitian-origin argument on the presumed fact that anti-Haitian sentiment was too high in the years just after the Dominican Republic had achieved independence to make it likely that Dominicans would knowingly play and dance to Haitian-derived music (Rodríguez Demorizi 1971, 125; Papito de Rivera in Anon 1976; Batista Matos 1999, 205). Yet the coexistence and contemporary embrace of merengue, mangulina, and carabiné on both sides of what was then only a hazy border suggests that they did just that. This does not necessarily mean that merengue did originate in Haiti, and there is no evidence that nineteenth century Dominicans thought it did. However, it does suggest that we cannot think of music and nationalism in the nineteenth century as being anything like the musical nationalism constructed in the twentieth century.

How can we explain mid-nineteenth century Dominicans' apparent embrace of musical traditions shared with Haiti? For one, as previously noted, no clear notion of national identities yet existed. Anne Eller explains how the Santo Domingo of the early 1800s was a place deeply divided by political opinion, class, and race, even though it was very mixed. Besides the usual categories of black slaves or freedmen, white creoles or *peninsulares*, *mulatos*, and *criollos*, Santo Domingo was also home to people then described as "French mulatos", "denaturalized Dominicans", and "Frenchified Dominicans". Such descriptors show that many Dominicans identified with the Haitian cause and traveled back and forth, east to west (2011, 135). Although it was a highly stratified society with significant racism, Eller shows that Santo Domingo was also regarded around the Caribbean as a safe haven for people of color due to its relatively prosperous mixed-race peasantry and lack of centralized control, so that it attracted black and mulatto migrants from all over the region, especially Puerto Rico (2011, 139).

This, then, is the context in which merengue emerged, only a decade after the Trinitarians, a group of elite white conspirators considered the Dominican Republic's "founding fathers", again separated east from west. Given this history, it becomes easier to understand how and why Dominicans and Haitians shared many music and dance traditions – and even to consider the possibility that Dominican "national" music has significant ties to Haiti. Merengue, mangulina, and carabiné were either both Haitian and Dominican, or neither, as all were essentially border-dwellers, *fronterizos*. The once much-lamented tumba, the first Dominican national dance, displaced by merengue, provides another piece in the story. Juan Francisco García reports that it was a kind of "creole contradance" that first appeared around 1822, itself displacing the favored genres from the time of Spanish rule in the 1810s, which included *villancicos*, *boleros*, *fandanguillos*, *sones*, and *quadrilles* (1947, 12). A musicologist must ask, is it merely coincidence that the tumba arrived in Santo Domingo at the same time as the Haitian rulers? That it, too, was adored by the Spanish-speaking inhabitants? That it survives today only in eastern Cuba, where as *tumba francesa* is deemed an expression of the descendants of immigrants from the French colony of Saint-Domingue?

In fact, the *tumba francesa*'s characteristics show that its connections to Dominican and Haitian dance and music practices go beyond conjecture. One of its three principal *toques* or rhythms is the *masón*, and one feature that distinguishes this *toque* from the others, *yubá* and

frente, is its use of a small, two-headed drum called a *tambora*, which is played using a stick in the right hand and with the palm of the left (here used only to stop or muffle sound, rather than to make its own sounds; Alén 1986, 52).⁵ Choreographically, Lapidus explains that the *masón* is a partner dance "believed to be based on the *contradanse* of the French plantocracy; it greatly resembles the Haitian *kontradanza*" (Lapidus 2008, 341). In Haiti one can still find rhythms called *mazon* and *djouba* (Lapidus 2008, 341), which is not the case for the Dominican Republic; however, the use of the *tambora* and the *contradance*-like choreography seem to correspond to descriptions of the nineteenth-century Dominican *tumba*. As I will discuss below, the presence of a *pambiche*-like rhythm called *tumba* in early Dominican field recordings lends additional support to the idea that the modern Cuban practice and the disappeared Dominican one are related.

Merengue makes a brief appearance in the writings of Santiaguero Ulises Espaillat, who was briefly President, only to disappear from view again until the twentieth century. Nonetheless, it survived the 1880s-90s rule of Ulises Heureux – a black military leader, born of Haitian and St Thomas parents, twice elected and later Dictator – as well as the many upheavals of the first decade of the twentieth century. Nationalism was simultaneously growing, as was an elite desire to separate the Haitian from the Dominican, generally in order to vilify the former.⁶

First steps towards merengue's nationalization

Political and economic turmoil led the U.S. to occupy the Dominican Republic in 1916, just as they had in Haiti one year earlier. This occupation was decisive for the emergence of merengue as a *national* music, not just a representative of regional, Cibaeño culture. It is at this time that the genre is taken up in earnest in the written discourse on Dominican music; we also find more evidence of its performance, mainly in the familiar trio of accordion, *tambora*, and *güira*. It is important to note that these first steps towards nationalizing the merengue are taken as a result of threats posed by U.S. American domination – not by Haiti. Both countries were suffering under foreign occupation.

While the most popular dances of the time were those emanating from the occupiers – Charleston, one-step, foxtrot – some Cibaeño composers dared to initiate a shift. Thus, Juan Espínola and Juan Francisco "Pancho" García debuted merengues in Santiago and La Vega dances in 1921-22. Together with the nascent recording industry, these measures helped the dance gain acceptance. Contemporary debates show an elite deeply divided on questions of national culture, some defending merengue on the basis of its indisputable Dominicanness, others condemning it for being "disorganized" – much as had the *Oasis* articles 70 years earlier.

5. The construction of the Cuban *tambora* differs from the Dominican one, but Alén believes the addition of the *tambora* to the *tumba francesa* ensemble and its use of metal fittings (rather than the rope ties preferred by Dominicans) to be "American innovations" – in other words, New World additions to a basically African musical format (1986, 48). This view conflicts with Dominican beliefs about merengue instruments, in which the *tambora* stands for Africa in the ensemble, but accords with more recent research by Edgardo Díaz Díaz, who hypothesizes that merengue (not *pambiche*) *tambora* playing derives from European snare drumming (2008, 249-251).

6. Classic examples include the 1891 *costumbrista* novel by César Nicolás Pensón titled *Cosas Añejas* and many *décimas* by Alix from the same decade. Philologist Andrés Mateo describes Alix's work as a notable example of the early use of folklore to support a regime, that of Ulises Heureaux (Mateo 1993, 205). The *décimas* remain important historical sources, both for their modeling of Trujillo's later use of folk music and for their observant descriptions of late nineteenth-century peasant life.

An oft-told story about merengue centers on the American occupation of the Dominican Republic and the emergence of the pambiche. It takes place at the Cibaño port of Puerto Plata, and westward all the way to the still-fuzzy Haitian border, at this time the location of a shared culture. The story's veracity has been contested by Dominican scholars such as Julio César Paulino (1986) and its ideological meaning unpacked by North American scholars like Paul Austerlitz (1997, 41-42), but it continues to be retold in nearly every published history of merengue and held as true by most Dominicans familiar with the rhythm – so much so that star vocalist Johnny Ventura once refused to play pambiche, in part because of its foreign origins, which he called “not very flattering for Dominicans” (Ventura 1998, 139-140). Here is one version:

Since [the Americans] couldn't dance the agile and smooth rhythms of merengue, they danced it with little jumps, inventing a variant of merengue more in accordance with their sense of the rhythm [...]. José Antonio Rivera says that the pambiche was the creation of accordionist Toño Abréu and that he, “recognizing his creation did not match the traditional merengue, said: this is neither merengue nor fox-trot, it must be like the pambiche (Palm Beach), which is neither drill nor cashmere”⁸ (Jiménez 1981, 127).

Contradicting Ventura's interpretation, Austerlitz contends that the story continues to be repeated because it “stands occupation-era power relations on their head” by emphasizing Dominican creativity and American ineptitude (1997, 40). Indeed, according to Julio Alberto Hernández, in 1920, the first time merengue was played in a Puerto Plata ballroom (the Club de Comercio) it was followed by a “much applauded” pambiche (Del Castillo and García Arévalo 1989, 26). For the pambiche to have been well-received in the occupied city at the time, it does seem more likely that the dance served as a symbol of opposition to the invading forces than one of consent. Yet, while this is likely one reason Dominicans feel attracted to the story, and it is supported by a 1921 discussion in a La Vega newspaper urging Dominicans to reject foxtrot and other North American dances in favor of local ones (reprinted in Rodríguez Demorizi 1971, 140-143), it does not explain how the story actually came about.

Combining the new historiography with newspaper sources, historical recordings, and analysis of the rhythm and dance can itself reveal a few clues as to how pambiche emerged and got its name. One can be found in the accordionist the apocryphal story names. Born in Santiago in 1883, Toño Abréu was active throughout the Cibao, and later moved to San Cristóbal, Trujillo's hometown, because he was so favored by the Generalísimo. In 1942, Abreu was described in a newspaper article as “the Dominican accordionist that best knows the musical airs of the Island – understand, the Island, not only the Republic...” (Marrero Aristy 1942). It is clear the author means that Abréu was highly competent in Haitian as well as Dominican music.

The dance's characteristics may provide another clue. A 1983 Santiago newspaper article quotes Tin Pichardo, an elderly local expert in traditional dance, who reports that while the Americans did dance one-step to merengue, the pambiche came from a different source:

8. This same passage is used in Velázquez and Ureña (2004, 51) without crediting the original author and with this additional sentence: “The merengue has been maintained almost without alteration through a good part of its history. The only variation of importance occurred during the North American occupation and was termed Pambiche”, a statement that would likely surprise the many merengueros who have added new rhythms, instruments, and musical structures to the genre since then.

While the merengue was already being danced with the Yankee step, a woman from Dajabón called Monguita Peralta came along and brought a new merengue from the border, we could call it a Dominico-Haitian merengue. A merengue without paseo, with a different melody, so that the tambora had to be adapted to this new rhythm.

Now with the Yankee step and Monguita's merengue, a new merengue emerged: the pambiche. Then around 1930, 1932 a North American company established itself in Quinigua, called La Yuca, and there many Haitians came to work, and they brought songs that they danced moving the hips and with their hands behind them, African style.

"To the merengue, which had gone through the Yankee step already, they added the hip movement and Haitian elements, and that is what we Dominicans know as pambiche" (Casanova 1983, 4A).

Pichardo, who was an active dancer in the Cibao at the time, believed the pambiche rhythm to have been introduced by a border musician (who típico historian Rafael Chaljub Mejía has identified as one of the earlier female accordionists) and its dance steps by Haitian workers.

The rhythm itself is more syncopated than the merengue; its accents seem to fit the Caribbean *tresillo* or even, at times, *clave*. Its tricky rhythms, and the fact that it is not played much slower than merengue, seem already to contradict the American origin story. But defining the pambiche rhythm turns out to be rather complicated. There are different ways of playing it even today. And in the past, similar rhythms had different names, and possibly were used for different dances.

In 1944, North American musicologist Jacob Coopersmith became the first to make field recordings of Dominican folk music. He came with government support on the invitation of Flor de Oro Trujillo, the dictator's daughter, and recorded only in the Cibao. Coopersmith does not tell us what his informants called the songs they performed, but it is clear that they did play pambiches, since he provides a notated pambiche rhythm (1949, 59; Figure 2) as well as the myth about the marines. His notation somewhat resembles today's pambiche in its first measure, but not in the second. (Its elastic triplets and polymetric feel likely gave him trouble, much as they had to those Haitian *mereng/meringue* composers who proposed 5/8 notation.) On the recordings themselves, ten songs have accompanying Dominican drum rhythms that sound very similar to the modern pambiche. These include one song with the chorus "baile el pambiche" (dance the pambiche); the "Chenche Matriculado", a song *ballet folklórico* groups use today for a dance of the same name; and five versions of "El Tingo Talango", no longer part of the típico repertoire. A few years later, in her landmark 1947-48 field recordings, Dominican folklorist Edna Garrido did not call any of the songs she recorded a "pambiche", but we can hear pambiche-like rhythms in two *yucas*, one *tumba*, and a couple of *merengues linieros*. *Liniero* refers to La Línea, or the Dominico-Haitian border region, but in this case the genre is played by a group from San Juan de la Maguana, a mountain town a bit further south originally established as a *maniel* or maroon community. The other examples come from the central Cibao (Santiago and Jarabacoa) and their names suggest they were danced with different steps and choreographies – possibly even as a *contradance*, as in the case of the now-extinct *tumba*. Together, these recordings demonstrate that the pambiche rhythm was well-known and widely distributed by the 1940s, but that it had different names and (probably) accompanying dances. Its association with La Línea is also suggestive.

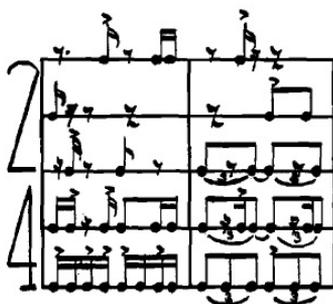


Figure 2 / Coopersmith's pambiche transcription.

Still other suggestive associations can be found, for instance by comparing pambiche with the *bongó de monte* pattern for the *changüí* music of Cuba's Oriente province. Ethnomusicologist Benjamin Lapidus believes that this particular rhythm came to eastern Cuba from Haiti, not insignificantly, along with the *tumba francesa* dance suite. Lapidus further ties it to a rhythm of the *petwo* family of vodou (Lapidus 2008, 134).⁹ The name "petwo" is said to derive from an 18th-century dance named after one Don Pedro, a black man of Spanish origin born near Port-au-Prince (Moreau de St Mery, quoted in de Marchena 1942, 49, n2). While recent scholars are skeptical of this origin myth, it is yet another discursive link between the two sides of the island among the many we find when researching pambiche.¹⁰ It also seems to confirm that vodou practices were not brought from west to east, as some Dominicans would hold, but long existed throughout the island, though with different nomenclature (in the Dominican Republic they are called *devoción a los misterios*).

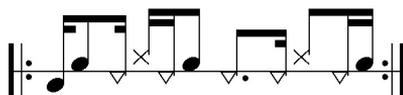


Figure 3 / Tambora pattern for tumba, Ramón Suero as recorded by Edna Garrido, 1947 (American Folklife Center #9363B).

Such evidence suggests that pambiche existed before 1916 and that it likely came eastward from the border area. But if this is true, from where then did the dancing marine origin story originate? Dominican music researchers Catana Pérez de Cuello and Julio César Paulino blame Coopersmith for the apocryphal story about the marines (Pérez de Cuello 2005, 312). But

9. The *ralé* rhythm of vodou is played on a single-headed hand drum, the pambiche on a double-headed drum with a stick, meaning that the strokes are different, but the sound is much the same, though an extra stroke is added in the Dominican rhythm. The translation of a movement pattern from one percussion instrument to another is not uncommon in Dominican music, as when *congueros* in *merengue típico* take the *tambora*'s stick pattern and play it on the side of their instrument.

10. I am not the first to suggest that pambiche is older than the Palm Beach story suggests, although my view differs in key points from the theories Dominican scholars have so far offered. For instance Paulino suggests that pambiche derives from the *aire juangomero* (Paulino 1986, 15), a view with which Pérez de Cuello and Manuel Marino Miniño concur (Pérez de Cuello 2005, 312-313). However, the testimony Paulino uses dramatically postdates the events in question, so his dates cannot be considered reliable; the rhythmic signature of the "juangomero" is uncertain, given that none of the three "juangomeros" Coopersmith recorded have a pambiche-like *tambora* rhythm; and Golíbart González states that he heard "El Juangomero" sung in 1909 as a *merengue* (1947, 43).

while I have found no earlier version, even Coopersmith appears not to believe the tale. He himself suggests that the term “pambiche” may instead derive from the kreyol *bamboche* (Coopersmith 1949, 59). And in fact, in 1940, anthropologist George Simpson wrote that northern Haitian rural dances featured a genre called *bambocha* along with *mangouline* and *méringue* (Simpson 1940, 211). Even before that, Katherine Dunham, conducting research on Haitian dance in 1936, reported that Saturday night country dances or bamboches featured music she described as “heavily influenced or wholly borrowed from nearby Cuba or adjoining Santo Domingo, a constant exchange no matter what the political atmosphere between the countries may be at the time” (Dunham 1969, 212-213). There, couple dances like “méringue” were performed to the music of a lead singer, a “guitar, Cuban style” (perhaps a *tres*), “Congo drums” (probably long drums like *palos*); maracas, gourd or metal shakers, and the “marimboula” (the bass lamellophone called *marimba* by Dominicans, *marímbula* by Cubans). So overlapping were the repertoires and styles that “the songs and dances fuse into each other so that [...] one could just as well be in a thatch-covered clearing in Cuba or across the border in Santo Domingo as in Haiti” (Dunham 1969, 212-213). Such overlaps hint that Coopersmith may have been right in suggesting a Kreyol etymology.

Rhythms, etymologies, oral testimonies, geographic data, and historical ties support the notion that pambiche is a border music grown out of historic ties between Haitians and Dominicans. But if this is so, how were these ties broken and this history erased? How did the marine myth so doubtfully recounted by Coopersmith come to take over the discourse and bury competing stories? The answers take us to the bloodiest moment in the Dominican Republic’s already bloody history – that of the 1937 ethnic cleansing called either the “Parsley Massacre” or simply “El Corte”, in which some 30,000 Haitians and Haitian Dominicans were murdered.

The Parsley massacre and the whiteness of merengue

In his book, *Mito y cultura en la era de Trujillo*, Andrés Mateo outlines three key myths created to buttress *trujillismo*: the myth of reconstruction, the myth of the massacre, and the myth of peace. For us, the most important is the second: it entails the ways in which intellectuals worked to justify the act of ethnic cleansing. According to the myth, the massacre was necessary in order to secure the Dominican nation and its borders, yet it also demonstrated the extreme nature of Trujillo’s power, and that the geographic margins of the country were not peripheral, but rather central to its national imaginary and the centralization of power (Mateo 2003, 116).

The reality is quite different from the myth, as even Trujillo’s record suggests. While we might expect to find rising animosity between the nations prior to the event, in fact, 1936 actually saw enhanced Dominican-Haitian diplomacy – to the degree that the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD) sent a letter to the Nobel Prize Committee urging them to consider Trujillo for a Peace Prize due to the historic border accords he had just signed with Haitian president Stenio Vicent (Mateo 1993, 112-113). In a speech at the border, Trujillo himself described Haitians and Dominicans as “the same” and in newspapers he proudly, and publically claimed his Haitian ancestry (Turits 2002, 607-611). The ideology of antihaitianismo he later propagated seems actually to have been the work of intellectuals educated abroad, including Joaquín Balaguer, Arturo Peña Batlle, and Julio Ortega Frier (Turits 2002, 608).

On the border itself, ties between residents of both cultures were extremely close, and this situation had existed for decades. Historian Richard Turits tells us the Línea (frontier) region was first settled by people from the French-speaking side in the 1870s. In the 1890s, several of Alix's *décimas* dealt with border culture and employed a mix of Spanish, Cibaeño dialect, and Kreyol to do so. An example is the most famous of Alix's anti-Haitian poems, "Diálogo cantado entre un guajiro dominicano y un papá bocó haitiano en un fandango en Dajabón", which imitates an improvised *décima* contest between peasants at a party in the titular Haitian-Dominican border town (Alix [1874]1938). Throughout, the Haitian tries to get the Dominican to join in with his vodou rites, but the Dominican refuses, always saying, "I'm Dominican, I don't dance *jodú*". Yet, as linguistics scholar Silke Jansen shows, Alix makes an unintended point in this piece (and several others). The speech of both interlocutors is rendered in dialect, the Dominican's emulating Cibaeño pronunciation, the Haitian's a mix of Spanish, Kreyol, and French. The mixture is so pronounced, Jansen writes, that it is

hardly comprehensible to readers unfamiliar with Creole and/or French. We could therefore assume that both Alix and his public may have had at least some passive knowledge of Haitian Creole – a very interesting detail, because it may hint to the fact that in the late 19th and the beginning of the 20th century Dominicans and Haitians living near the border were, in fact, members of a shared bilingual community of practice¹¹ (Jansen 2015, 88-89).

Even Haitianophobe Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi reported that in 1922 40% of the Dominican border population consisted of *patuá*-speaking Haitians, and that in 1975, "it is rare to find a Dominican [in the border region] who does not know any 'patua'", in part because of the widespread use of Haitian servants and laborers (Lipski 1994, 18).

At a national level, in far-off Santo Domingo, proclamations that Haiti and the Dominican Republic would soon become "socially speaking, like one country" – as a 1937 article in *La Opinión* declared (Turits 2002, 612) – competed with longstanding desires to police the border and Trujillo's move towards greater economic domination and control over trade (605). But nothing prepared the *fronterizos* for Trujillo's October 2, 1937, declaration that he was "fixing" the problem of cattle rustling by killing Haitians and that more murders would come (613-615). So shocked were they that the Dominicans feared they would be next (620).

It is hard to describe the carnage that ensued over the few days that followed as thousands of Haitian Dominicans were murdered with machetes – mostly by civilians – or otherwise fled to refugee settlements in the west, leaving some parishes 90% depopulated. Yet Turits has argued that the prevalence of anti-Haitian discourse was the *product* of the massacre, a top-down creation, not the cause of it. Retroactive justification was needed and subsequently provided by what Mateo calls "la casi totalidad de los intelectuales orgánicos del trujillismo" (Mateo 1993, 114). Their mythmaking apparatus was key to Trujillo's success, and so total were its effects that the stories they created still circulate and drive current affairs nearly eighty years later. Thus, it is important to recuperate the buried histories of border culture. I believe this bicultural world has much to do with how traditional dance and dance music evolved up to the time of the massacre. It helps us to understand why, in the mid-nineteenth

11. Just as the Dominican in the poem insists he does not understand Kreyol, so do many border Dominicans today, even when they do so quite well (Jansen 2015, 88-89).

century, both “Dominicans” and “Haitians” (terminology that did not stabilize until later) danced merengue, mangulina, and carabiné, and also how the pambiche came about. These new historical perspectives can also help us to unravel the myths built up around merengue, more numerous and perhaps more enduring than those Mateo outlined.

While Mateo acknowledges that folk culture – and merengue in particular – had a role to play in Trujillo’s mythmaking (2006), he does not mention the fact that music *scholars* produced their own myths, equally important in upholding the regime’s ideologies. Here I have discussed a few: the myth of patriotic origins, the myth of merengue’s whiteness, and the pambiche myth. It is vital to recognize these myths for what they are and to begin to dismantle them, but in doing so we must remember, as Turits urges, that the national identity of today, constructed around “an essentialized opposition between Haiti and the Dominican Republic”, is actually dependent on forgetting the cultural pluralism and transnationalism of pre-massacre society (Turits 2002, 635). We should also note that while Mateo’s *trujillista* myths have often been questioned since the fall of the dictator, the musicological ones still stand and, I would argue, continue their ideological work of ethnically cleansing the merengue of ties to Haiti.

Returning to the pambiche, we still must answer the question of why the story of the inept marines continues to be retold. To do so, we must consider how Coopersmith himself came to hear the story, and how it might have circulated before he put it in print. A clue might be found in an origin myth that predates Coopersmith’s book by two decades, one which appears in Julio Arzeno’s 1927 book, the first on Dominican folk music:

On a certain occasion, the Health department [*Sanidad*] took serious measures with respect to the *horizontales*, taking them to the National Police quarters, which in our town [Puerto Plata] occupy part of the San Felipe fortress, in whose precincts are also the prisons; and since the people call the zebra-striped suit prisoners wear “pambiche”, the popular muse of the peasants sang:

Mujey ‘de la vida’,

No te ponga trite:

Te lleban pay fueite

A labay pambiche

[‘Working’ woman / don’t be sad / they’re taking you to the fort / to wash pambiches] (Arzeno 1927, 50)

Unlike the long reach of Coopersmith’s story, this one seems never to have been repeated since. Yet it is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it is the earliest written work to mention pambiche. Secondly, like the later myth, this one too ties the beginnings of the pambiche, as a music and as a word, to Puerto Plata and to a suit of clothing. Unlike it, it tells us that the suits were worn not by American soldiers, but by local prostitutes – here termed “horizontals” and “women of the life”. This link is important because we know that prostitutes (both Haitian and Dominican) played important roles in disseminating dances (and not only on this island; note their centrality to the birth of tango, e.g.). For instance, Gage Averill writes that in the 1920s and 1930s, musical interchange at the border was frequent. It was sometimes effected by “fi fwontye”, literally “border women”, or Dominican prostitutes who were popular in pre-occupation Haiti and helped import music like son and merengue (Averill 1989, 214). In the 1940s, famed photographer Earl Leaf reports in his strange, erotic travelogue that *only* Dominicans were employed in Port-au-Prince houses of prostitution (Haitian women worked

at the slightly more reputable *bistros*; Leaf 1948, 101). In the 1950s, Dominican recordings and touring groups greatly influenced Haitian musicians, particularly after a group simply called "Típico Cibaeño" had a hit in Haiti, and it was Dominican women who taught Haitian men to dance to the lively music. Meanwhile, Nemours Jean-Baptiste created his "konpa-direk" by taking the Dominican rhythm and harmonic approach, slowing it down, and adding a modified conga part (Averill 1989, 222).

Rafael Chaljub Mejía tells us that the term *perico ripiao*, a common if somewhat disrespectful name for the merengue típico ensemble, derives from the name of an early-twentieth-century Santiago brothel¹² (2002, 70-71). Why *ripiáo*, a word uncommon in Spanish? It may come from the French *ripaille*, a colloquial term for a party (similar to *bamboche*) – thus making *merengue ripiao* a synonym for *merengue de fiesta*, a frequently-used term for core típico repertoire, and indeed for *pambiche/bamboche*, through the conduit of border bilingualism.

How was the transfer from prostitutes to U.S. marines put into effect? Coopersmith would not have known the country, probably did not speak Spanish, and thus would have been entirely dependent on his hosts for everything: identifying musicians to record, translating explanations, transportation, and more. Because of Coopersmith's ties to the Trujillos and the dictator's interest in his musical mission, we can form an idea of who those hosts might have been. Such an unsavory explanation as Arzeno's would not have presented Dominican folk music in a good light and would likely have been avoided. Also, Coopersmith was directed to record only in the Cibao, ostensibly the Dominican Republic's most Hispanic region. By the 1940s, any ties between Cibaeño folk music, supposedly the most Hispanic and "authentic" in the Republic, and Haitian music would certainly have been suppressed. What a potent use of irony and humor it would have been for Coopersmith's translator to transform the story of *pambiche*'s origins into a joke about American ineptitude on Dominican dance floors – exactly at the moment it was told to a representative of the United States.

Austerlitz guessed that this story's continued retelling had something to do with neocolonialism, that it was a kind of critique of the United States' role in Dominican politics, and he was partly right. Yet Haitians are still, always, the true Other in any Dominican origin myth since the massacre. From this viewpoint, telling the *pambiche* story today is less about remembering American invaders and more about forgetting Haitian neighbors. But at the moment of its birth, Coopersmith's visit in 1944, perhaps it was something else, or something more. By obliquely criticizing U.S. marines' movements in the 1910s-20s (perhaps at both the micro and macro level, i.e. the bodily movements of dancers and the large-scale movements of troops), this anonymous translator was making an even riskier move: she or he was also criticizing Trujillo, who, as it was well known, had trained with those same marines after joining the National Guard in 1918, and who was also responsible for introducing the once-reviled merengue into ballrooms nationwide.

Conclusions

This historical overview of early merengue and *pambiche* speaks to the closeness of merengue, *mangulina*, *pambiche*, *tumba francesa*, and *danza*, as well as the countries and cultures which

12. However, his source is modern-day journalist Huchi Lora, not an eyewitness, meaning it should be taken with a grain of salt.

today lay claim to them. The case of the pambiche provides evidence for longstanding musical and cultural interchanges that continue to influence Dominican musical culture at present – while also pointing towards their systematic erasure since the Trujillo era. More broadly, through this exploration of musical mythologies and Dominican history, I hope to have shown that unpacking the stories that have grown around traditional music can contribute to the new historiography of Haitian-Dominican relations and border culture, which in turn has activist potential for reframing Haitian-Dominican relations today. When we examine it in context, perhaps we can see merengue’s origin story as an example not of the birth of a unique and separate nation, but of innovation within a vibrant pan-Afro-Caribbean culture in which the nascent Dominican Republic played an important role.

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