

Sharing Common Ground: Social Dancing in the U.S.A.

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with Magaly E. Jarrad and Chan Moly Sam

Dancing is sheer pleasure for socializing, exercise, and self-expression. Dancing means celebration — people gathering together, with food and drink, at weddings, birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, holidays, block parties, for fundraisers, or just at end-of-the-week get-together parties. These social events take place in a variety of settings, from private homes to public parks. Dancing brings people together and continues to play a role in courtship.

Most of us learned to dance by going to parties, by observing our elders or peers, or by studying the technique of particularly good dancers. More recently, young people get a lot of their “moves” from videos and television. From these resources and experiences, we each develop our own style. Music is almost inseparable from social dancing and, for most of us, provides the inspiration to dance.

As an open and adaptive communicative system, social dance is always up-to-date and reflective of its times. Looking closer, one finds that dances are also strongly shaped by their community expressive traditions and social structures. Most dance steps and styles derive their moves from those of earlier dances and movement repertoires.

Dancing brings members of a community together and strengthens cohesiveness by emphasizing shared ethical and aesthetic values. Performing a common vocabulary of movement, in time to a shared repertoire of music, one participates in a culture.

The United States is blessed with a diversity of community dance traditions and new dance forms that have developed from interactions between communities. This exciting American mix has had a profound impact on the popular

cultures of nations across the world. The dance program at this year’s Festival explores social dancing traditions in five communities — an Appalachian community in southwest Virginia, Iroquois communities in upstate New York, and African American, Bolivian, and Cambodian American communities of Washington, D.C. Tradition-bearers will teach dances in workshops, participate in conversations on a variety of themes, and demonstrate skills, repertoires, and performance styles from their communities. In each of these communities, dance is centrally important in the expression of cultural identity. Consider the interplay of dance, community, and identity among two Washington area communities, Bolivian and Cambodian Americans.

Bolivian Dance in Washington, D.C.

For recent immigrant communities such as Bolivians in Washington, D.C., dance sustains an important part of their cultural heritage, reaffirming shared values in a new and rapidly changing environment. Music and dance also bring reminiscences of youth, courtship, and the culturally familiar. When away from “home,” people develop an increased awareness of cultural distinctiveness, and actively embrace what was once taken for granted. Cultural activities may become crucial in expressing one’s group identity and in presenting it to the greater American public.

The Bolivian community is one of the largest Latino communities in the Washington, D.C. area. A majority of the community came from the cities of La Paz, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and Oruro, and are of middle class mestizo background. In Bolivia, the population is comprised of 60% indigenous Aymara and Quechua peoples, 30% mixed Indian and Spanish (mestizo), and 10% European (primarily Spanish). Bolivia was under Spanish colonial rule from 1544 to 1824 when a republic was established. Bolivia became a democratic republic with a constitution

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Men perform the *caporales* dance at Elena and Andres Puña's wedding in Virginia.
Photo by Marlon Vasquez



in 1967. There has been ongoing immigration to the U.S. for more than 30 years, as well as frequent communication between Washington, D.C. and Bolivia as hundreds of families return each February to take part in two-week long Carnival celebrations in Oruro.

Cultural organizations in the Washington community engage Bolivian youth and families in folkloric dances and other social activities throughout the year. Weekend practice sessions provide opportunities for socializing, and July 4th, Hispanic, and Cherry Blossom parades down Constitution Avenue provide public recognition of the Bolivian community and its culture.

During the past 20 years Washington's Bolivian community has come to include "revived" folk traditions as part of its social dance repertoire to a greater extent than before. Dora Castellon, president of Comité Pro Bolivia, an umbrella

cultural organization, observes how social life was a few decades ago:

Growing up in Bolivia I loved to watch my father doing the *cueca*, but I wasn't allowed to dance it. These dances were looked down upon because they belonged to the middle and lower classes. The upper class would go to the balls and dance to music from outside the country, from the United States, like waltzes and rock-and-roll.

As a result of the nationalization of mines in 1952 and agrarian reform in 1953, indigenous communities that were previously kept immobile by a feudal-like political economy migrated to cities and abroad. They introduced their music and dance traditions to a wider society, and indigenous styles of dances such as the *huayño* were infused into the social dance repertoire. Huayño and other mestizo dances have since become part of the repertoire in the Washington, D.C. community.

Sixteen-year-old Andy Lopez participates in dancing as a way of maintaining his Bolivian roots:

In the United States, there are so many different cultures, and everybody seems to know where they come from. So since school doesn't deal with any part of our culture, the only way for us to really find out what our culture is, or just keep our culture, is for us to dance and stick with it.

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Magaly E. Jarrad is a dancer, choreographer, scholar, and teacher from Oruro, Bolivia. She has received prizes for her choreographies at the Carnival in Oruro. Ms. Jarrad currently directs a children's ballet theater in Glen Burnie, Maryland.

Chan Moly Sam is a Cambodian master dancer, choreographer, and scholar. Her publications include Khmer Folk Dance (1987), Khmer Court Dance: A Comprehensive Study of Movements, Gestures, and Postures as Applied Techniques (1987), and Khmer Court Dance: A Performance Manual (1989).

Angel Quinteros, who devotes his Sundays to performing and teaching Bolivian dance, explains, "I love doing dances like *caporales*; it makes me feel very powerful."

For many members of the Bolivian community, dancing is a passion and an essential ingredient at weddings, birthday parties, sweet 15 parties (*quinceañera*), baptisms, Carnival, and Virgin Mary celebrations. At house parties all generations participate. Seniors are often energetic and talented dancers, while children experience dance rhythms from infancy. Three clubs in northern Virginia feature live bands, while social dancing at smaller parties is inspired by record-playing deejays.

Dancing at social functions includes couple and group dances: the *cumbia*, *cueca*, *morenada*, *caporales*, *diablada*, *taquirari*, *huayño*, *carnivalito*, *salsa*, *merengue*, *disco*, and *slow dances*. This dance repertoire is an artifact of the complex cultural and social interactions that have taken place over the past 500 years in Bolivia and now in Bolivian communities in the U.S. It is a record of the inter-relationship of indigenous communities, European immigrants (Spanish, English, French, and Germans), enslaved Africans (brought to work in mines and plantations), nationals of neighboring countries and of the United States, and the international entertainment industry.

Traditionally, indigenous dances such as those of the Aymara and Quechua feature separate lines and circles of women and men, and small running steps moving from side to side that trace small semicircles, recalling agricultural planting movements. Mestizo dances have been influenced by European spatial patterns, dance steps such as skips, hops, and jumps, and the phenomenon of dancing in couples.

Most Bolivian parties start with a pan-Latin dance like the *cumbia*, a Colombian dance with a strong African-derived rhythm. In *cumbia*, dancers turn waists, hips, and shoulders as they step from side to side. Next come livelier dances — *morenada*, *diablada*, and *caporales* — that are featured at the pre-Lenten festivity of Carnival. Although dances for the actual Carnival procession require much practice, their basic steps can be fairly easily done as social dances.

The *diablada* dance represents the symbolic struggle between good and evil. According to traditional belief, the mines in cities like Oruro and Potosi, where much of the population earns a living, are inhabited by Supay, owner of the minerals. Supay was later interpreted by Europeans as the *diablo*, or devil. The community prays to the

Virgin Mary and Archangel Michael to keep the devils in their place and to prevent them from harming its miners. The *diablada* features a tune in 2/4 marching time and bouncy steps, jumps, and kicks while the dancer turns from side to side.

Two dances recall the exploitation of enslaved Africans brought by Spaniards to work in the mines and plantations during the colonial period. According to some, the *morenada* represents the forced march of slaves toward the mines of Potosi in the Andes. According to others, it represents the movements of slaves crushing grapes in vineyards in the Xingas tropical plantation area. The dance is said to have been first performed by the descendants of slaves. *Morenada* is often danced in a circle, with small, slow, side steps and occasional turns, and is accompanied musically by the *matracas*, which simulate the sound of chains or of cranks turning the wine presses.

The *caporales*, a dance created within the last 20 years, borrows features from the indigenous Aymaran *cullaguada* (turning steps from one side to the other with frontal jumps and kicks), has a driving rhythm from *negritos del patador* (an Afro-Bolivian regional dance), and combines shoulder movements from the Brazilian *samba*. Borrowing a personage from the *morenada* dance, the dance depicts the harsh treatment of slaves by the *caporale* (foreman) and his wife on plantations during the colonial period. *Caporales* has gained enormous popularity in recent years and is especially attractive to teenagers, who enjoy the challenge of learning and performing it. Gender roles are very defined in this dynamic dance. Boys and men perform stomping, strong, percussive movements while girls and women perform smaller, flirtatious, and swinging hip movements.

The *cueca* is a popular courting dance for couples. Influenced by the Spanish *sevillanes* in its spatial pattern, the *cueca* is done with a polka-like step. It has four parts. After an introduction and salute, the man dances behind the woman as they travel in a small circle, he pursuing, she teasing, both twirling handkerchiefs. They meet and dance side by side in the *quimba* section, and finish together in the *zapateo* with fast tapping footwork. Drinks are often offered to the dancers before the dance is repeated.

In internationally popular dances such as *merengue* and *lambada*, couples dance apart or in a closed position. Originally from the Dominican Republic, the *merengue* seems to have resulted from a confluence of European contra dance

and an African style of movement. Its rhythm is fast, and when danced in a closed position, partners move as one by taking little side steps as they turn.

After a few slow dances like bolero, parties traditionally close with a carnivalito or huayño, during which everyone joins in or is pulled from their seats. These are joyous dances in fast, 2/4 time featuring small running, stomping, hopping, and jumping movements. The huayño begins as a couple dance with partners holding hands or linking arms. As momentum gathers lines are formed, and dancers wind around the room in circular, zig-zag, or intersecting patterns. Often the bandleader or deejay will give directions such as “pull the ears” or “hands on hips,” “do turns,” “dance on one foot,” or “slow down.” It is not uncommon for women to dance with each other in these dances. Using a variety of cultural resources, Bolivians in the D.C. area enjoy each other’s company and dance out rich identities to themselves, to each other, and to their neighbors.

Cambodian American Dance in Washington, D.C.

Among the Cambodian community in the Washington area, social dancing helps to bring individuals and families together at weddings, New Year’s, birthdays, graduations, and fundraisers. The selection of dances and the way they are danced at parties reflect distinctive cultural history, aesthetics, and ethical ideas as well as recent influences of an American context.

The roots of Cambodian dance span millennia in Southeast Asia. Throughout its 2,000-year history, Cambodian culture has had a fertile interchange with the cultures of India, China, and Indonesia. From the 9th to the 15th centuries, the Angkor Empire fostered a subtle intermingling of Indian and indigenous elements to produce a culture regarded by many scholars as among the richest and most creative in Southeast Asia. At its largest, the Khmer Empire ranged from the border of China into present-day Thailand, Laos, and southern Vietnam. Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863 and gained independence in 1953. Since 1975, after the fall of Cambodia to Khmer Rouge forces, the Cambodian community in Washington, D.C. has steadily grown to about 15,000. While many immigrated from urban Phnom Penh, a significant number also came from more rural areas in the provinces of Battambang, Siem Reap, and Kampong Thom.

Cambodian social dance uses leaf and flower

hand movements, two of the four basic gestures of classical dance: tendril (*chanol*), leaf (*lear*), flower (*chip*), and fruit (*kuong*). These represent the cycle of fertility and were performed ritually to visualize the creative spirit of plants and flowers. Vuthy Kheav, 30, who grew up on a farm in Siem Reap province, remembers dancing the *ram vong*, *ram kbach*, and *lam leav* in the rice fields at the completion of planting and harvest, to the accompaniment of the *tro*, a two-string fiddle, and *skor dai*, a hand drum. Sochietah Ung, 35, learned to dance at seasonal festivals that featured free movies and social dancing in the evenings. Chan Moly Sam recalls that “Every New Year celebration in Phnom Penh, you heard the pattern of the drum from dusk to dawn, or sometimes throughout the night, for three days.”

Ram vong is always the first dance at any social event, often followed by ram kbach and lam leav. These are all circle dances done in couples in a counterclockwise direction in 4/4 time. In ram vong the female leads while the male pursues her, traveling from side to side, seeking eye contact. Ram kbach, a slow, graceful dance that conveys harmony, is performed with one leg crossing in front of the other as the body inclines diagonally from one side to the other. In lam leav, a courtship dance from Stung Treng province, the partners move in interwoven patterns. *Khmer leu*, from the northern provinces, features a three-count wrist movement. In *saravann*, partners face each other, moving their arms rhythmically, raising and lowering them, opening and closing them like the wings of a bird. The dances allow participants the freedom to do variations and improvisations. For example, in time to the rhythmic pattern of saravann music, a skillful couple can travel forwards, backwards, or sideways to elaborate on the image of a bird rising into the air, soaring, and landing. These dances embody the value of attentiveness in male and female relationships, and they are an important part of courtship.

The dances also express the value of balance and harmony. Dancers cultivate internal balance as their gestures flow rhythmically with the music. Symmetrical movements alternate from one side to the other. Moderation is valued; one should not overdo or neglect movements.

Many Cambodians are equally at ease with European-derived dances. Popular western music and social dances were introduced to Cambodians by Filipinos and the French. In the early 1900s, the Cambodian court received the gift of a large band in residence from the Philippines.



Nara and Sambonn Lek and friends dance the *ram vong*, a traditional Cambodian circle dance.
Photo by Sambonn Lek

The Filipino musicians taught marching music to Cambodian royal and symphonic bands, participated in court ensembles, and performed in jazz bands at nightclubs. The musicians introduced Latin rhythms into Cambodian dance, founding big bands that played at ballroom dances. They developed a kind of music that came to be called *phleng manila*, or Filipino ensemble music. This musical innovation greatly expanded the Cambodian repertoire.

Mr. Lek Chhan, a distinguished dancer now in his seventies, learned European dances — the tango, Boston, cha-cha-cha, rumba, foxtrot, waltz — from his French professor in Phnom Penh. Fellow students also taught each other with recordings and attended nightclubs and bars. Western music was also disseminated by French high school teachers; and in some military academies, high ranking officers received formal training in European-derived dances. The madison was in vogue by the 1950s, and the twist introduced by the popular entertainer Chum Kem upon his return from France in the early 1960s.

At parties in the Washington area, musicians usually play dances in pairs, juxtaposing fast and slow tempos. Contemporary bands usually feature male and female vocalists, lead, rhythm, and bass guitars, and a drum set or synthesizer. In adopting European-derived dance music such as cha-cha-cha or tango, Cambodians retained the rhythms and composed Khmer melodies and lyrics to each song; they simplified the dance

steps. Dances like the cha-cha-cha and madison are interpreted with deft and subtle hip, back, and foot movements.

At social events in Cambodia, dance expressed social relationships and values, and the dance floor often became an arena of gestural eloquence. Traditionally, young men and women were only allowed to socialize with each other at New Year's, which provided a rare and important opportunity to meet, dance, and talk. Women would sit together on one side of the room while the men sat on the other. A man would offer *sam-peah*, a greeting of respect performed to invite a young woman to dance and to take his leave on parting. There was no physical contact in traditional Cambodian dances.

Traditionally, young women were kept close to the family. As they reached their middle teens they entered *chaul mlob*, or "went into shadow," meaning they were not to be seen in public, especially by young men. Young men were freer in comparison and were encouraged to explore the outside world and society.

While women were encouraged to show interest in the court dance traditions, men were groomed to be good social dancers. In an older generation, men danced a flamboyant expressive role compared with women's modest one. Her execution of social dances was not expected to be as creative or as varied as her partner's. Members of older generations expected that at social events, behavior was performed and evaluated

and everyone was watching. A young man seeking a young lady chose his movements carefully, with an eye to impressing her family members present at the event. Moderation and attentiveness were highly valued, while wild and self-involved movements were looked upon with disfavor. While the separation of the sexes is no longer practiced in the American context, the connotations of movement still persist.

At wedding receptions, the bride and groom and their parents initiate the celebration with the ram vong. As revered elders, the parents are the first to give blessings to the new couple through dance. At other functions, the host or another prominent person leads the circle dances.

In the Washington community, seniors participate in social dancing but only minimally in fast genres like the twist, disco, and rock. Youngsters have free range of the floor, often dancing in separate groupings of boys and of girls.

Community members note that while dance movements have remained essentially the same, there have been changes in gender roles. Influenced by the role of women in American society, Cambodian women have become less confined, more assertive, and more nearly equal as dance partners. Many people feel that the dancing is better now with opportunity for more fun.

Phavann Chhuan talks about the importance of dance and community for young people sorting out their identity:

We get the kids to social functions as often as we can, to expose them to Khmer culture, to give them both views. Maybe through peer pressure or group participation they'll see that it's acceptable to do Cambodian dance as well as include other dances with it. We want to bring them up in an environment where people accept different cultures, where the kids will not forget their heritage.

Shaped by traditional ideas of beauty, order, and the individual, social dance is a rich and deep language for communicating ideas and identities. Like a language it is a formal set of categories and transformations that keeps us in touch with centuries of meaning. Yet it is always open to change to serve the needs of the moment. It is a tool for living that enables us to comprehend the voices and actions of others, respond to them, and make them our own.

Washington social dance repertoires continue to evolve and grow as new dances are taught

by relatives, friends, and home videos. Marco Castellon added some football moves to caporales and brought it down to Oruro, Bolivia, where he traded steps and videos with students there. (They showed him a new version of caporales that incorporates a freeze, taking inspiration from hip-hop.) Lashmi Sam brought the newest Cambodian American dance "Harvesting the Shrimp" from Seattle and is teaching it to neighbors in Reston.

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Suggested Listening

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- Cambodian Traditional Music*, Vol. 2. Smithsonian/Folkways 4082.
- Instruments and Music of Bolivia*. Smithsonian/Folkways 4012.
- Word of Love*. Sann Huy Film Video Production, CD 2.
- Souvenirs Khmer Air Lines*. Chlangden Productions, CD 034.
- Dream of You*. Preah Vihear Production, CD 2.