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Coros de Clave

Coros de clave, literally 'clave choirs,' were ambulatory choral groups that would circulate in the streets of the western Cuban cities of Havana and Matanzas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly during the Christmas holidays. Although this tradition has not been extant at least since the 1960s, its repertoire and vocal style are thought to be an important influence on *guaguancó*, the most

popular style of the Afro-Cuban music and dance genre rumba. In addition to *coros de clave*, there were also groups called *coros de guaguancó*, which differed in certain ways, although the two are often discussed as the same tradition. Scholars utilize a variety of names to refer to the tradition, and it is likely that there were different appellations used in Havana and Matanzas. For example, in discussions of the tradition in Matanzas, scholars have used the terms *coros de rumba* (Grasso González 1989, 9; Évora 1997, 187) and *bandos* (Martínez Rodríguez 1977, 128; Esquenazi Pérez 2001, 210). Although mentioned by numerous scholars, there are no in-depth studies on this tradition.

History

Coros de clave were an Afro-Cuban imitation of Catalan choral societies brought to Havana in the later nineteenth century, and were named after a Catalan composer, José Anselmo Clavé, who established a choral society made up of uneducated, working-class people in Barcelona in 1845 (Sublette 2004, 262–3). (The *coros* were not, therefore, named after the percussion instrument consisting of two wooden sticks beaten against each other to provide a timeline rhythm, although *claves* were used in performance.) Several scholars discuss the emergence of *coros de clave* in terms of the specific situation of blacks in late nineteenth-century Cuba – that is, the gradual abolition of slavery in the 1880s and the large-scale migration of former slaves from rural plantations to urban centers. In addition, the tradition is often linked to *cabildos* – colonial-era mutual aid societies formed by African slaves and their ancestors along ethnic lines – with some scholars asserting that *coros de clave* functioned as a substitute in the wake of the dismantling of *cabildos* after full emancipation in 1886 (Grasso González 1989, 9; Sublette 2004, 263).

Although *coros de clave* and *guaguancó* are generally linked to Havana and Matanzas, the *tonada trinitaria* from the central Cuban city of Trinidad is sometimes discussed as part of this tradition (see León 1984, 163). Martha Esquenazi Pérez states that the *coros de clave* tradition migrated to the city of Sancti Spiritus (near Trinidad) around 1894, and that societies were founded there in the early twentieth century (2001, 210). She also discusses the *tonada trinitaria* within the *coros de clave* tradition, specifically noting that the different choral groups were, like the *coros*, defined by neighborhood of origin and engaged in competition during the Christmas holidays (ibid., 211).

There does not seem to be a consensus within the scholarship about how long this tradition lasted.

The dates given for its disappearance range from the early twentieth century (Alén Rodríguez 1998, 863; Évora 1997, 189), to the 1920s (Sublette 2004, 263), to the 1950s (Esquenazi Pérez 2001, 218). Nonetheless, both Évora (1997, 187) and Argeliers León (1984, 161) suggest that the famed Matanzas group Bando Azul was still extant in the early 1960s, and Grasso González asserts that it was still active into the 1980s (1989, 9).

Musical Description

Coros de clave were constituted by as many as 150 choral singers, and generally included a director, usually the most experienced member of the group, and a *clarina*, a female lead singer who possessed a particularly powerful voice, and who engaged in call and response with the chorus, usually singing in two- or three-part harmony (Moore 1997, 92). In addition, the *decimista* was the primary composer of the group, the *tonista* kept the group in tune and functioned as a conductor, and the *ensor* was 'responsible for the quality of the song texts and the beauty of the melodies' (Alén Rodríguez 1998, 836). The *décima*, or Spanish ten-line poetic form, was the most common lyrical structure, although sometimes texts consisted of more simple rhyme schemes. Descriptions of the instrumental ensemble used to accompany *coros de clave* vary somewhat within the literature, but the most commonly mentioned instruments are guitar(s), *claves* and *viola*, a string-less banjo that was struck in a percussive manner. In addition, accompaniment could include a small harp, *botija* (earthenware jug that is blown and serves a bass function) or other instruments. It is likely that there was substantial regional variation in the instrumentation of central Cuban manifestations of the tradition, especially in *tonada trinitaria* (Esquenazi Pérez, 212).

Although *coros de clave* and *coros de guaguancó* are often discussed as the same tradition, some scholars note differences between the two, with most asserting that the latter evolved from the former (see Esquenazi Pérez 2001, 215; Sublette 2004, 263). Argeliers León differentiates them further, by noting that they developed independently of each other and that the *coros de clave* repertoire was more often appropriated for use in the *teatro bufo*, or comic theater, tradition (León 1984, 163). Robin Moore characterizes the *coros de guaguancó* tradition as more Africanized, more percussive and as having a higher proportion of male singers (1997, 92). In addition, unlike the *coros de clave*, *coros de guaguancó* incorporated membranophones, and were generally sung in 2/4 as compared with the typical 6/8 meter of the former (ibid.). In fact, some scholars assert that *coros de guaguancó*

utilized *cajones*, or wooden boxes of various sizes that functioned as drums (Esquenazi Pérez 2001, 217; Sublette 2004, 263), which also constituted the instrumental ensemble of early rumba, before the incorporation of *conga* drums in the 1930s. Esquenazi Pérez implies that there may also have been a greater spirit of rivalry within the *coros de guaguancó* tradition, and presents fragments from a few songs that constitute *puyas*, or lyrical battles of wit between groups. A few of the most famous *coros de guaguancó* in Havana were El Paso Franco, Azules Amalianos (formed as early as 1862) and Los Roncos, the last of which became the most famous in part because its main composer was legendary *son* musician Ignacio Pineiro. Some of the famous *coros de rumba* in Matanzas were the Bando Azul, the Bando Rojo, El Marino and Los Congos de Angonga. The Bando Azul, which maintained a famous rivalry with the Bando Rojo, emerged in 1910 from an *Arará cabildo* (Grasso González 1989, 11), which was dedicated to preserving the religion and traditions of slaves and descendants from the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, present-day Benin. This history thus constitutes evidence of the close links between the choral societies and the Afro-Cuban *cabildo* tradition.

Although *coros de clave* and *guaguancó* are no longer extant traditions, and unfortunately do not seem to have been recorded in their original manifestations, their influence lives on in secular traditions still practiced in the early twenty-first century. For example, the mobile performance format of *coros de clave* is echoed in the Cuban carnival *comparsas*, which are also ambulatory ensembles that parade through the streets and engage in lyrical competition and friendly rivalry. In fact, León (1984, 161–2) notes that the *coros* often organized *comparsas* during Carnival, composing special songs for the occasion, and Cristóbal Díaz Ayala (2003, 109) asserts that the *coros de guaguancó* were the basis for the renewal of *comparsas* after they were banned for a period in the 1910s. The most important legacy of this tradition is in the arena of *rumba* song, and prominent *rumba* groups – such as the Havana-based Clave y Guaguancó (whose name is a homage to the defunct practice) and the Matanzas-based AfroCuba de Matanzas – still perform songs from the *coros de clave* repertoire.

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Corrido

The *corrido* is a Mexican narrative song or folk ballad accompanied by one or more guitars and, in the later twentieth century, accordion-driven *norteño* groups or *bandas* (brass bands from Mexico's northern Pacific coast). The *corrido* is a folksong type not primarily associated with dance, though people may dance to *corridos* when performed by dance bands in polka or waltz rhythm. The genre has evolved as a mestizo cultural form associated with the rise of a national consciousness, especially during the early decades of the twentieth century, and in the context of border conflicts with the United States. As the *corrido* has been transmitted predominantly by live performance for much of its history, its limited appearance in the form of leaflets (songsheets) and its later appearance in the form of commercial sound recordings represent an important source for the documentation of Mexico's unofficial history. *Corridos* in these forms comment not only on political events, national affairs and natural disasters, but also on subjects such as crimes, family feuds, horse races, romantic entanglements, immigration and, since the 1990s, drug trafficking. As a folk genre, the *corrido's* characters, events and themes represent the values and histories of local communities.

Historically, the *corrido* is a Mexican folk ballad that, like the Spanish broadside ballad, stems from the Spanish *romancero*, a ballad tradition that flourished in Renaissance Spain. Soldiers, adventurers, merchants and settlers carried the tradition to the New World, where it took root among the mestizo populations with varying degrees of popular acceptance. The Spanish *romance* was a balladry of such importance in expansionist Iberia that it swept the whole of Latin America: not only are Spanish *romances* still known across Latin America, but also several ballad traditions stemming from the romance have developed throughout the continent bearing striking similarities to one another. In Argentina and Chile, compositions known as *romances*, *cantares*, *corridos* and *tonadas* have been collected since the latter part of the nineteenth century. In its poetic forms and narrative subjects the early Mexican *corrido* is true to its roots in Iberian narrative poetry, although there are some non-narrative examples, such as simple love songs or political commentaries, that are also referred to as *corridos*. Throughout the nineteenth century, a variety