



Teacher Handout: Cumbia

Region of origin: Caribbean Coast of Colombia

Background: The three cultural roots of Cumbia are African, Indigenous, and Spanish. These three elements mixed to create the music of Cumbia that we understand today. In the colonial era, a high percentage of enslaved people were brought from Calabar, Nigeria to Latin America, and many of their rituals and customs were passed on through generations of descendants. Calabar is considered the place of origin of the percussive instruments used in the Cumbia ensemble, such as the *tambor alegre* drum and the *tambor llamador*.

Before Cumbia was born, the indigenous Koguis, Arhuacos, Ika, Wiwa, and Atánques of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta already played the *gaita*, a traditional flute, but called it *kuisi*. The *gaita* is made with tubes from different types of cactus, such as *cardón* or *pitahaya*. Its characteristic black head is made of beeswax combined with powdered charcoal to make the wax more resistant to heat.

From the Spanish, Cumbia inherited some traditional clothing worn by dancers, as well as the Spanish language used to sing Cumbia songs.

Musical Characteristics: The Cumbia percussion ensemble comprises four major musical elements: the *tambor alegre*, *la tambora*, *el llamador*, and *las maracas*.

The *tambor alegre* is built from the trunk of the Banco or Caracolí tree. Its shape is conical and is 70x28 centimeters in diameter at the upper end, where the head of the drum goes, and 25 centimeters in diameter at the lower end, which is left open. The head is made from calf, deer or goat skin, and the parts are assembled using ropes and wooden wedges that serve to temper the drumhead.

The *tambora* is a cylindrical drum played with two drumsticks. It consists of a straight tube and two membranes made of goat or deer leather. The elements are assembled with the help of a cylindrical ring from which arises strings arranged in the shape of a Y, which serve to temper the heads of the instrument.

The shape of the *llamador* is very similar to the *tambor alegre*, except smaller. Made up of a conical body 30 or 40 centimeters high, its drumhead, located in the widest mouth of the frame, is fitted with a ring made of ropes.

Maracas are traditionally made from gourds with seeds inside (*chuiras*, specifically). This instrument was a contribution of the indigenous culture and it secures the whole percussion ensemble. Older *maracas* are more valued, because the *chuiras* will be worn down, creating a sweeter sound.



Musical Activity: Students will not only be able to sing the Cumbia rhythm in 4 different instruments, but also to learn words in spanish.

The first rhythm is the *tambor alegre* and can be vocalized by saying “*Camarón, mi camarón*” (“Shrimp, my shrimp”).

CA MA RÓN MI CA MA RÓN | CA MA RÓN MI CA MA RÓN |

The second rhythm is the *Tambora* and can be vocalized by saying: “*Ven a bailar, a bailar, esta Cumbia*” (“Come dance, dance this Cumbia.”)

VEN A BAI-LAR - A BAI LAR ES TA CUM BIA

The third rhythm is *tambor llamador* and can be vocalized by saying: “*Del mar, del mar*” (From the sea, from the sea.)

DEL MAR DEL MAR | DEL MAR DEL MAR |

The last instrument is *maraca* and can be vocalized by saying: “sss” as if imitating a snake sound.

SSS SSS | SSS SSS |

Dance Activity: Indigenous Peoples of Colombia and Africans in the Americas started mixing their cultures during colonial times to create steps that Cumbia dancers use today and recognize as their own. The candles, the flirtation, the light, the worship of the gods, and the sowing and harvest of the field all play a part in the movements of traditional Cumbia dancers. Cumbia is not danced randomly and all of these elements are involved in the representation of the characters and stories told through dance. The footsteps of Cumbia quite literally follow the rhythm and sound of the *tambor llamador* (see above musical figure and instructional video).

Dancing with una paquete de velas (package of candles):

The Spanish influence is clearly seen in the women’s clothing, such as ruffled women’s blouses and skirts that can extend far for twirling. As they dance, women hold candles in their hands, with



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arms extended in the shape of a large half circle above their shoulders. As they step in rhythm, they hold the candles aloft as their skirts swirl around them. This gesture signifies a courtship game, a flirtation, with other male dancers.

Dancing with el sombrero (the hat):

The sombrero vueltiao is a symbolic and iconic artifact. This hat has its origins in the Zenú culture, indigenous to Colombia, and is made from a natural fiber from a palm tree, known as arrow cane. Thanks to a traditional technique implemented by the Zenú culture more than a thousand years ago the braiding represents elements of the cosmogony (the theory of the order of the universe) based in this indigenous culture.

The artisanal art of the vueltiao hat is like a book that tells the stories of nature as it narrates different types of activities such as hunting, fishing, farming, religion. Since each vueltiao hat is a handmade piece that people have been designing for more than three hundred years, it retains the color white as its foundation as the ancient artisans did not know the technique of painting. Currently, the traditional vueltiao hat is produced in two fiber colors: black and white, thus giving it a true touch of elegance.