

Deciphering *Guarapachangueo*: Formulas and Formulaic Variation in Contemporary Rumba Percussion

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This paper serves to provide a musical analysis and to track the evolution of *guarapachangueo*, a major influence in the contemporary style of Cuban rumba. Drawing on studies of musical improvisation such as those of Turino (2009), Monson (1996), and Berliner (1994), I provide a short history of the influence of *guarapachangueo* in the contemporary rumba scene and analyze several of the rhythmic formulas and variations used by drummers. To better understand the musical decisions made by these musicians, I emphasize a performer's point of view and approach rumba as an ever-evolving musical language—one that is internalized by performers and which shapes their musical habitus. My goal is to invigorate the scholarly discourse and musical analysis regarding rumba and other music traditions in which formulaic performance is a central feature. *Guarapachangueo*, an innovative stylistic approach to rumba percussion originating as a set of rhythmic formulas created by the Chinitos family¹ in the early 1970s on the outskirts of Havana, has directly and profoundly influenced that city's rumba scene². Accordingly, I will concentrate primarily on *rumberos* from Havana and their musical legacy in Cuba and abroad, including the many recordings since the 1990s that feature the style.

Bodenheimer (2015) describes several characteristics of contemporary rumba and *guarapachangueo*. She notes the latter term's polysemic nature, evidenced by the many contrasting and overlapping definitions of the style by *rumberos* in Cuba. While such descriptions are useful in understanding the discourse of *rumberos*, some need reframing, particularly the common and yet nebulous idea that the style entails increased improvisation in the lower register of the percussion. As an active performer and proponent of the style who specializes in the lower register percussion (i.e. *cajón* and *tumbador*), I will draw upon my experiences and those of fellow musicians, as well as commercial and online recordings to highlight the structural formulas and variations used in rumba's contemporary rhythmic vocabulary. Further, I provide a selected discography and contextualize these musical features within the history of *guarapachangueo*, tracing their spread among professional groups and recognizing their application in the *cajón al muerto*, a common musical event in the Afro-Cuban religious scene held in honor of one's accompanying spirits.

Following Turino's (2009) lead in distinguishing between improvisation and formulaic performance, I argue that *guarapachangueo* comprises an aesthetic approach to playing rumba in which unique, innovative formulas are employed, representing a break with the standardized formulas of traditional rumba from

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the second half of the 20th century. The new rhythmic formulas produce a heightened sense of tension and release, emphasize conversation (the interactive exchange of percussive phrases) between drummers, and in some cases are marked by increased space between notes and phrases. These new formulas comprise an updated musical vocabulary popular among rumberos in Cuba and abroad since the 1990s, although with perhaps less influence in Matanzas, where many musicians and groups tend to exhibit a distinct regional style which continues to evolve in its own right. As with other Afro-Cuban music traditions, in rumba the drummers learn and internalize formulas and variations they have been exposed to by fellow rumberos and recordings, and some come to comprise part of their musical habitus. The formulas are then drawn upon—often unconsciously—by the musicians in the form of musical decisions that “say something” in the flow of a rumba performance.

Some Background on Rumba

Rumba is a secular music and dance tradition that originated among Afro-Cubans in Havana and Matanzas in the mid-late 19th century.³ Musically, rumba comprises singing and percussion accompaniment, a format common in other Afro-Cuban traditions and easily replicated in rumba’s original historical contexts, namely impromptu jam sessions. Rumberos are known for using whatever is at hand (e.g. a crate, a wall, spoons) to accompany singing. Meanwhile, singers take turns with songs and people can move their feet and bodies to the music or take turns dancing solo or in pairs. This is the spirit of rumba in its original, informal contexts, which lives on in gatherings of rumberos in homes, patios, and courtyards. The song form of rumba in these “intimate spaces” differs from that of amateur and professional ensembles that perform rumba for audiences, as well as their commercial recordings (Frías 2019).⁴

In part due to these ensembles and recordings, particularly from the 1950s onward, rumba became increasingly standardized in terms of instruments, rhythms, ensemble roles, dance, and song form. Two primary regional styles of rumba—Havana and Matanzas—emerged, represented in popular recordings by the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ Presently, there are three surviving variants of rumba: *yambú*, *guaguancó*, and *columbia*. In this paper I will focus on *guaguancó*—by far the most popular variant—and the one in which the *guarapachangueo* style is usually applied. As Moore (2006, 193) has noted, Afro-Cuban traditional music, including rumba, has experienced a renaissance since the 1990s in terms of public performances and recordings due to various factors, such as economic policies, foreign interest, and self-promotion, the latter now usually through social media. My references in this study to contemporary rumba coincide with this renaissance

since the 1990s, which is when the influence of guarapachangueo in Havana becomes obvious.

Standard percussion instruments include the clave (two wooden dowels struck together), *catá* (sticks played on bamboo or a woodblock), *cajones* (wooden boxes), and *tumbadoras* (often known outside Cuba as congas). The clave and *catá* have fixed roles; the terms also refer to their rhythms, comprised of short ostinatos that serve as timelines. The clave—reinforced by the *catá* rhythm—is the reference point for all the other roles in rumba. The percussion and singing line up with the clave according to largely unspoken, mutually understood rules, in a manner that reflects the rhythmic tension and release inherent in the clave itself. For instance, the third note is generally felt as suspended, while the fifth note is a point of resolution (Gerstin 2017, Mauleon 1993, Peñalosa 2009, Spiro 2006). In what rumberos term traditional guaguancó (i.e. standardized in the second half of the 20th century) there are typically three drum roles, usually played on *tumbadoras*: *tumbador* (low register), *tres-dos* (middle register), and *quinto* (high register). The *tumbador* and the *tres-dos* feature stable rhythmic formulas in the form of ostinatos; drummers then add variations in response to the singer(s) and other drummers.⁶ The *quinto* embellishes in response to the singer, other drummers, or dancers, drawing on a vocabulary of formulas and variations (Friedman 1978, Hines 2015).

The image shows three staves of musical notation for Clave, Tumbador, and Tres-dos. Each staff begins with a double bar line, a common time signature (C), and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Clave staff has a sequence of notes: a quarter note (upward stem), a dotted quarter note (downward stem), an eighth note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), and a quarter note (downward stem). The Tumbador staff has a sequence of notes: a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), and a quarter note (downward stem). The Tres-dos staff has a sequence of notes: a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), a quarter note (downward stem), and a quarter note (downward stem).

Example 1: Rhythmic formulas of the *tres-dos* and *tumbador* in traditional guaguancó. This example and those that follow have all been transcribed by the author without the inclusion of the unaccented inner beats used for timekeeping. While these inner beats are important for drummers to learn and know, I will focus on the notes that are most audible and relevant to each formula: bass tones, open and muff tones, and in some cases slaps. Downward-facing stems in the drum parts refer to bass tones; upward-facing stems indicate open tones.

Distinguishing the Meanings of Guarapachangueo

Bodenheimer (2015) has been one of the few scholars to discuss guarapachangueo and other trends in contemporary rumba performance. However, a thorough musical analysis of the style has yet to be undertaken. Adrian Coburg's

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encyclopedic *Percusión afrocubana: Volume 1* (2007) contains a few notated examples of guarapachangueo rhythms by percussionists Fredy Martínez and Julio Davalos, although these differ from the Chinitos' formulas and seem to be personal interpretations. Otherwise, instructional books and scholarly literature have focused on rumba from the second half of the 20th century (Averill 1999, Crook 1982, Friedman 1978). Of course, most contemporary rumberos—particularly younger generations—no longer rely solely on the rhythmic vocabulary of past generations. While drummers, particularly older generations, often speak of upholding tradition, roles and rhythmic vocabularies are constantly updated and evolving. This is where the influence of guarapachangueo enters: it has been a fundamental part of contemporary stylistic approaches to drummers' roles and rhythmic formulas—which drummers refer to as *patrones* or *bases*—in Havana. First created by a particular family of rumberos (the Chinitos), their style slowly gained acceptance and inspired the other rumberos with whom they interacted to engender their own innovations.⁷ In short, the style has been a key influence—directly and indirectly—on recent generations of Havana-based rumberos, particularly from the 1980s and 1990s, when elements were first adopted and adapted by some of the city's most popular rumba groups and their recordings.

Indeed, the contemporary style of rumba percussion in Havana, Miami, and New York, is often associated with the name guarapachangueo, although the two are not synonymous. After all, rumba has always absorbed influences from numerous sources, including popular music and the music of Afro-Cuban religious traditions. The term guarapachangueo has become a subject of debate for both rumberos and scholars, with various definitions attached to it. It is not a variant such as yambú or guaguancó, with more-or-less standardized, agreed-upon distinguishing features. Based on the discourse I have heard from rumberos, there are two dominant understandings of guarapachangueo performance. On the one hand, there is the original or Chinitos-style guarapachangueo, a set of related rhythmic formulas favored by the various members of the Chinitos family and their associated group of musicians. Although not widely recognized in the international community prior to the 2000s, they are now associated with creating the style. As documented by Bodenheimer (2015), they first created guarapachangueo in the 1970s as a new style of playing rumba which utilized two drummers—instead of the normal three—who engaged in a highly interactional rhythmic exchange quite different from the standard rumba drum rhythms of the time. The Chinitos' approach combines the role of the tres-dos and the tumbador and features a unique rhythmic vocabulary. The style continues to be performed and evolved by the Chinitos and others, perhaps mostly notably by one of the younger Chinitos family members, Manley "Piri" López.

A second, broader understanding of guarapachangueo encompasses the style as it has been adopted and performed by Havana-based rumba groups and the larger contemporary rumba community. These manifestations of guarapachangueo are the result of adapting elements of the of the Chinitos' style to a larger ensemble, usually with three drummers armed with both cajones and tumbadoras. For instance, Pancho Quinto (Francisco Hernández Mora), who like many of the most well-known rumberos of Havana, frequented the Chinitos' rumbas since the 1970s, creatively adapted guarapachangueo formulas for his group, Yoruba Andabo. Due to the prominence of his name and his group's recordings, he was often thought of as the creator of guarapachangueo prior to the 2000s, which is when the contributions of Los Chinitos were documented by some of their European students (Bodenheimer 2015, 185). Incidentally, Pancho Quinto mentored the Chinitos' in becoming *tamboleros* (consecrated batá drummers) in the 1980s, and the Chinitos, especially Irián López Rodríguez, in turn innovated the *tambor*⁸ scene through the Abbilona project⁹. In the 1990s, the guarapachangueo influence became evident—to a varying degree—in the performances and recordings of many Havana-based groups. It is pertinent to acknowledge that guarapachangueo as an aesthetic is associated with a general impetus towards innovation and evolution in the drummers' rhythms and roles. What distinguishes the style from rumba more broadly is the use of a set of related structural rhythmic formulas—most clearly defined in the low-register drum role(s)—many of which can be traced back to these two early contexts of the style, namely the Chinitos, Pancho Quinto, and Havana rumba groups from the 1990s.

Personal Experiences with Guarapachangueo

Alain Fernández, a singer with whom I work as a *tambolero*¹⁰ in Miami, has often told me stories about how he frequented the rumbas at the Chinitos' house when he was a kid in the 1980s. He lived a few doors down from them, and according to him, every January 1 and Mother's Day, "all the rumberos from Havana" (e.g. Juan de Dios Ramos, El Negro, Chan, El Chori, Fariñas, Pancho Quinto, Maximino Duquesne, Mario "Aspirina" Jáuregui) would attend. Notably, many of the percussionists of Yoruba Andabo and Rumberos de Cuba—two of the large ensembles which adapted the guarapachangueo style and popularized it through their performances and recordings in the 1990s and 2000s—frequented the Chinitos' rumbas. Even now in the 2020s, they continue to host rumbas, many of which are filmed and posted on YouTube by foreign students that come to see and study with them, particularly with one of the Chinitos brothers, Irián López. I had the privilege of participating in one of the Chinitos' rumbas at their home in 2019. While visiting the island, fellow rumbero Charley Rivas and I were invited by Manley "Piri" López (one of the younger members of the Chinitos) to help organize it. We knew Piri from when he lived in Miami in the early 2010s, but he

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has since resided in Mexico City. Charley and I bought a case of rum, some ingredients for a *caldosa* (creole stew), and Piri put the word out to local rumberos. During the rumba, after Charley and I had taken a turn on the cajón and quinto, respectively, Piri and Adonis Panter Calderón (ex-member of Yoruba Andabo and founder of Osain del Monte, one of the city's most popular rumba groups) sat down. It was inspiring to see them play together, as both are recognized as being among the most talented drummers of their generation in the Afro-Cuban traditional music scene internationally.

At the time, I had been studying the Chinitos' guarapachangueo rhythms since the mid-2000s via YouTube videos and interviews uploaded by some of their European students. However, my initial interest in rumba began in the late 1990s as I was studying Latin jazz in my high school jazz band. Thereafter, I began making trips to Havana to study rumba percussion, dancing, and singing, facilitated by my ability to stay with family there. Later, during my time living in New York in the early 2010s, I formed part of the group La Nueva Timba de Cajón, which performed weekly at a local spot in the Bronx. The group, under the leadership of Muñequitos de Matanzas singer Andro Mella (who resided in the Bronx for about a year before returning to Cuba permanently), featured a guarapachangueo stylistic approach and a minimalist two-drummer format, with me on the cajón and Abi Holliday on quinto cajón. Being from the same young generation (in our late twenties), and having played with various rumba groups, Abi and I were avid proponents of guarapachangueo in both its Chinitos and large ensemble manifestations. Abi had emphasized to me how *Rapsodia rumbera*—an early guarapachangueo-inflected album that featured many of the percussionists of what would later become Rumberos de Cuba—had heavily influenced him and fellow New York-based rumberos of his generation in the late 1990s.

In the mid-2000s, I had put together a four-person Chinitos-style rumba group in Puerto Rico as a side project with some of the members of the larger rumba group I directed, but it was short-lived, as the Chinitos' style of guarapachangueo has not resonated as much in Puerto Rico's rumba scene.¹¹ Indeed, the primary influence of guarapachangueo in the larger rumba scene, including amateur and professional groups in Puerto Rico and the Cuban provinces outside Havana has come via the guarapachangueo-influenced large rumba ensembles like Yoruba Andabo and Rumberos de Cuba. For example, in the case of San Juan-based Yubá Iré, the director (Héctor Calderón) and some of the other founding members had gone to Cuba in the late 1990s to take classes with members of Yoruba Andabo and Irosso Obbá, instilling an influence that remains clear in their performance style (Frías 2019).

Locating Guarapachanguero in Group Performance

As Bodenheimer (2015, 195) notes, many contemporary rumba groups in the Cuban provinces outside Havana reflect the influence of the Havana-based groups' ensemble roles, instrumentation, and rhythmic formulas. Examples include Rumbatá in Camagüey (whose members were mentored by Clave y Guaguancó), Kokoyé in Santiago, Columbia del Puerto in Matanzas, and Santa Clara-based Awó Aché. Newer Havana groups like Timbalaye, Osain del Monte, and Ronald y su Explosión Rumbera also reflect the instrumentation and ensemble format that emerged from the 1990s Havana guarapachanguero groups, including having three drummers (tumbador, tres-dos, quinto), each armed with cajones and tumbadoras (one or more per person). This instrumentation has emerged as a prominent characteristic of contemporary rumba for full ensembles, along with the use of arrangements with breaks and rhythm changes, not to mention the influence of and fusion with other genres like reggaeton, *timba*, *tambor*, *makuta*, and *conga*, the latter referring to the music of Cuba's carnival traditions. For example, Yoruba Andabo's recording of the song "La cafetera,"¹² with its catchy, conga-like choruses and medium-tempo guarapachanguero grooves is probably one of the most successful rumba hits, with over four million views on YouTube since it was uploaded in 2018. The song's chorus has become a popular anthem on the island and abroad, including among Cubans who might not otherwise listen to rumba recordings. As a reminder that rumba has always incorporated popular music influences of each generation (e.g. songs from the *trova* and *bolero* repertoire of the early- and mid-20th century), trends in contemporary rumba, such as reggaeton-inflected choruses and breaks reminiscent of timba bands, are ways of connecting with and reflecting current generations of performers and fans.

Another area in which guarapachanguero is featured is in the performance of *cajones al muerto*, sometimes known in a stricter sense as a *cajones espirituales*. These religious events are held in honor of one's spiritual companions, featuring songs from Cuban Spiritism and, to varying degrees, Bantu-Cuban repertoires. The songs are accompanied by what is essentially a small rumba ensemble featuring cajón, quinto cajón, catá, and sometimes tumbadoras (Balbuena 2020, Warden 2006). *Cajones*—as the events are casually known¹³—are more of a western and central Cuban phenomenon; the Spiritist practices and songs from Oriente in eastern Cuba were transformed in the western part of the island, where musicians accompanied them with rumba percussion and rhythms, often adding some of the *congo* (i.e. Bantu-Cuban) repertoires of *palo* and *makuta*. *Cajones* as events are quite common in Havana, to the degree that there are groups of *cajoneros* that specialize in performing them. *Cajones* are also common events in Miami and New York in communities of those who follow Afro-Cuban religious

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traditions. Perhaps more so than in Havana, where many groups specialize in one area (e.g. tambor, *güiro*¹⁴ or *cajón*), in Miami and New York most groups of tamboleros also offer their services in performing *güiros* and *cajones*. *Cajones* are an oft-overlooked area of rumba percussion performance, and although the song formats and themes differ from those performed in a rumba event per se, contemporary rumba approaches, including guarapachangueo influences, are employed by *cajoneros*, whom are generally *rumberos* as well.

The Chinitos work as *cajón* musicians as well, and videos of both their *cajón* performances¹⁵ and of the rumbas they host¹⁶ are perhaps the best way to hear and see their particular style, as they have rarely been featured as a group in commercial recordings of rumba. The Chinitos use a two-drummer ensemble format in *cajones*, as do the majority of *cajoneros*, in part because less players means a better cut of the *derecho* (money paid to the musicians). The two-drummer format (i.e. quinto and *cajón*, each optionally paired with *tumbadoras*), along with the *catá* and sometimes *clave*, is also the most common in Miami and New York, and provides an opportunity to foreground the Chinitos' particular style, tailored as it is for two-drummer formats. Of course, the stylistic approach—whether more traditional or guarapachangueo-inflected, for example—is the choice of the drummers, particularly the person in the lower register (i.e. *cajón* or *cajón/tumbador* role), who establishes the approach through the use of certain *patrones* (archetypal or structural rhythmic formulas). As someone who is usually in this role in both *cajones al muerto* and rumbas, I have drawn a lot of my personal stylistic approach from the Chinitos, specifically their *cajón* player Mario Lorenzo Aragón Cruz, who himself draws on many of Pedro López's original formulas, as well as the individual approaches of Pedro, Irián, and Piri. I have also learned a great deal from my godfather Daniel González Gil, ex-*Clave y Guaguancó* drummer, who is from Juanelos in San Miguel del Padrón (i.e. near the Chinitos' neighborhood), an area heavily associated with *rumberos*. His style of playing the *cajón/tumbador* incorporates clear Chinitos influences, with their heavy dose of groove and funkiness; he also has his own innovative, melodic style, in part stemming from his past experiences working with *Clave y Guaguancó* and El Greco's jazz band in Havana, not to mention his experience as a *tambolero*. He is a great example of the multiple musical influences that converge in each *rumbero* to create individual styles. Before I continue discussing his and other musicians' approaches to guarapachangueo, I would like to present a brief review of the evolution of the style since the 1990s as represented in recordings.

I compiled a selected discography, listed at the end of this article, of what I consider to be the most important and influential guarapachangueo audio and visual recordings. Organized chronologically and spanning the 1990s to the present, the list represents the evolution of guarapachangueo and the various paths it took in the hands of performers. Of course, the Chinitos had been creating

and utilizing the style in the 1970s and 1980s, including as part of Juan de Dios Ramos's folkloric group *Raíces Profundas* in the 1980s (Bodenheimer 2015). In the 1990s and early 2000s, the style exploded in popularity in Cuba and abroad, and began surfacing in diaspora communities like New York (Jottar 2009). Key figures, groups, and projects during the 1990s included Pancho Quinto (as director of Yoruba Andabo and in his solo projects) and *Rapsodia rumbera*. Clave y Guaguancó, whose director Amado Dedeu fused rumba with other Cuban genres, also exhibits some influences of guarapachangueo. The group coincided with Yoruba Andabo in expanding the percussion battery, combining cajones with tumbadoras. In the 2000s, Rumberos de Cuba continued the approach of *Rapsodia rumbera*, Yoruba Andabo and Clave y Guaguancó incorporated some younger talent and continued their evolutions, Pedro Martínez and Román Díaz (ex-members of Yoruba Andabo) recorded a guarapachangueo album in New York, and the Chinitos gained recognition via YouTube documentaries and instructional videos uploaded by foreign students.

While Yoruba Andabo continues to be an important force, some of the main innovations in guarapachangueo-inflected rumba since the 2010s have arguably been spearheaded by two of the most virtuosic drummers in the Afro-Cuban traditional music scene: Manley "Piri" López of the Chinitos (son of Pedro López, a creator of the initial guarapachangueo formulas), who has resided in Mexico City since the 2010s; and Adonis Panter Calderón, who directs the popular Havana-based rumba group Osain del Monte and is featured in several YouTube videos performing a contemporary rumba style heavily influenced by guarapachangueo.¹⁷ Both Piri and Adonis, as they are commonly known in the scene, foreground experimentation and virtuosity in their approach. They are looked up to by younger players and influence the scene at a transnational level, especially via recordings and social media, where they are at the forefront of the evolution of rumba, tambor, and Afro-Cuban jazz. While Adonis's recordings generally show an adherence to the three- or two-drummer format of guarapachangueo, Piri has gone even further in evolving the style, creating an ensemble format in which as little as one drummer (himself) is used. For instance, he combines the normal two or three drum roles into one in the form of the *batería batá* (*batá* drumset), a creation of his comprising three batá strapped together in front of him, a cajón (and sometimes snare drum) on the side, a hi-hat, foot cowbell, and cymbals, the latter played with his hands. Despite the wide variety of paths that guarapachangueo has taken in the hands of its many performers, I argue that there is a common, underlying rhythmic vocabulary which stems from the use of core structural formulas that correspond with several of the original Chinitos formulas and those of Pancho Quinto.

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Theoretical Framing

Several scholars in recent decades have provided insightful theoretical concepts that can be applied to analyses of African and Afro-diasporic musics. Of course, as Gerstin (2017) recognizes, we must use caution in assuming that a single approach or theory from one area or set of traditions (e.g. Afro-Cuban music or Ewe drumming) will apply to others, or to all West African or Afro-diasporic musics. Nonetheless, several theoretical concepts pertain well to rumba and many Afro-Cuban traditions, including Anku's (2000) observations on the cyclic nature of time in African music and Burns's (2010) recognition of "rhythmic archetypes" (e.g. *clave*, *tumbao*, one-drop) that constitute part of a "deep structural grammar" common to many Afro-diasporic musics.

Indeed, the frequent references made by rumberos to "conversing" or "saying something" are why I believe rumba can be fruitfully analyzed through the metaphors of language and conversation. As with many of the traditions and generational or regional styles of Afro-Cuban music, including traditional rumba (Friedman 1978), *guarapachangueo* can only be performed properly if the drummers are fully competent in conversing within the style. Both Monson (1996) and Berliner (1994) use language metaphors to analyze jazz, and such analysis lends itself well to rumba, because like jazz, the performance of a rumba "piece" is only a guideline based on a set of formulas pertaining to elements such as rhythm, melody, and structure. The same rumba songs and accompaniment will vary each time, based on the musicians' collective interpretations, group interaction, and quick individual musical decisions. These decisions—which may vary in spontaneity—are often described as improvisation because they seem to be invented in the moment and are not preconceived or written down. However, a more critical analysis will bring us closer to understanding what is happening inside the mind of a performer.

I find the ideas in Turino's (2009) chapter "Formulas and improvisation in participatory music" highly suitable for analyzing *guarapachangueo* percussion. Following Judith Becker (1972), Turino distinguishes between improvisation and formulaic performance. In music based on formulaic performance, musical pieces are treated "as loose models with associated collections of formulas rather than as set, closely reproducible items" (Turino 2009, 104). Improvisation, on the other hand, is explained as "instances in performance where I surprise myself with purposeful alterations, extensions, or flights away from the model and habitual formulas" (Turino 2009, 105). At once a more critical and intimate definition of improvisation, Turino reminds us that it is often only the performer—and maybe those who know their playing intimately—that can distinguish when such "surprise" moments happen. Indeed, such decisions are often formulaic variations, defined by Turino (2009, 104) as "melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic

paradigmatic substitutions... made before in relation to the basic model.” Both Anku (2000) and David Locke (2011) make similar observations regarding improvisation among lead drummers in West African traditions, asserting that rather than being characterized by utter free choice, drummers work within internalized frameworks of rules and formulas that they draw on and vary. Rumba and other Afro-Cuban music traditions are based on formulaic performance, and much of the musical content that has often been described as improvisation is actually formulaic variation. I am not arguing that improvisation—in the sense of surprises that depart from habitual formulas—does not occur. Indeed, such instances are a key factor in the continual evolution of many music traditions. However, distinguishing improvisation from formulaic variation is crucial in understanding guarapachangueo and Afro-Cuban drumming traditions more broadly.

Bodenheimer (2015) pinpoints some recurring elements in rumberos’ varying definitions of guarapachangueo, some of which include the presence of a rhythmic pattern described onomatopoeically as *tukutukum*, greater improvisation in the cajón or tumbador (with no set rhythm), and increased conversation between the quinto and the cajón or tumbador. In my opinion, the last two elements—which deal with the characteristic increase in improvisation in the percussion—are at the heart of the style, musically. Guarapachangueo is undoubtedly marked by an increase in freedom of choice in the percussive dialogue. However, there are many common rhythmic formulas—including the *tukutukum*—that provide structure to the percussion and shape the choices for formulaic variation. Many contemporary rumberos—influenced by the tendencies of individuals, groups, generations, and regions—continue to habitually adhere to many of these formulas.

Among Cuban rumberos, no one says “let’s play guarapachangueo,” rather, it tends to be synonymous with the contemporary generational approach to rumba and emerges as part of the context and the performer’s preferences. On the other hand, a juxtaposition exists between the contemporary style of rumba and so-called traditional rumba, that is, the older, standardized formulas of past generations. In the case of traditional guaguancó, the rhythmic formulas of the tres-dos and tumbador are comparatively fixed; drummers play embellishments but generally return quickly to the basic formula (Example 2) (Crook 1982, Friedman 1978).¹⁸ These rhythmic formulas were standardized in the mid-late 20th century in part due to the reach and influence of commercial recordings.¹⁹

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The image shows three staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Clave' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth and quarter notes. The middle staff is labeled 'Tumbador' and shows a sequence of notes, with a specific note on the fourth beat of the second measure marked with a dot underneath, indicating a muffled tone. The bottom staff is labeled 'Tres-dos' and shows a few notes, with a rest on the fourth beat of the second measure.

Example 2. An example of a common embellishment used in traditional guaguancó in the tumbador, which tends to embellish more than the tres-dos. In this case, instead of an open tone on beat four of the second measure, the drummer embellishes with muff tones (indicated by a dot under the note) for emphasis, but then returns to the basic formula. This is but one example, but embellishments like these can be repeated a few times or combined with others, especially in the *montuno* (call and response section of a rumba) or in the space following the end of a sung phrase in the verse.

Compared with the steady, evenly-spaced rhythmic formulas in traditional guaguancó, guarapachangueo—particularly the Chinitos’ style—features an aesthetic of heightened tension and release²⁰ in the formulas used by drummers, marked by greater space between rhythmic phrases and less adherence to a single formula in the lower register. While the cajón or tumbador (low register) role is generally more variable, the degree of variability (i.e. switching between different formulas and variations) and choice of formulas is up to the drummer(s), or in the case of a performance group, can be a director or arranger’s decision. This greater variability also highlights the lower levels of rhythmic standardization in guarapachangueo as compared to traditional guaguancó. Indeed, the guarapachangueo influence in contemporary rumba is represented in part by new formulas and greater freedom to switch between them. Nonetheless, drummers tend to rely primarily on a few formulas and variations in a given performance. While improvisation does occur in rumba to a degree, the majority of what a drummer plays in the lower register role is based on internalized structural formulas, and much of what may seem like free play or improvisation to an onlooker is instead comprised of formulaic variations surfacing as habitual, unconscious decisions.

In rumba, each drummer builds up a personal musical vocabulary consisting in large part of formulas and variations, learned consciously and unconsciously from various live or recorded contexts. As a drummer gains experience through practice and performance, they internalize established rules and conventions to know when, where, and how to use their musical vocabulary. In other words, their vocabulary must become part of their musical habitus. Like

a fluent speaker, they will then be able to participate in a conversation without needing to think before each utterance. The formulas and variations that form the core of musical vocabularies can be recombined and varied according to the interaction between the musicians. From this point of view, guarapachangueo features a related set of formulas and an updated generational (i.e. post-1990s) rhythmic vocabulary, as well as increased latitude for both formulaic variation and improvisation in the lower register. Of course, percentages of improvisation and formulaic variation will differ between individuals and contexts²¹. In the following section, I will examine some of the most frequently used structural rhythmic formulas in guarapachangueo, including their contexts and common modes of formulaic variation.

Formula Analysis

The first formula I will point out is the original guarapachangueo rhythm as described by Pedro López Rodríguez (Example 3). According to him, he and his cousin Luís Ramón “Wicho” Zuleta López came up with it while drumming on a wooden wall of the house. In a 2011 documentary by Antoine Miniconi,²² Pedro demonstrates the rhythm on the cajón,²³ where it is primarily employed, as opposed to the tumbadora. Perhaps the most common variation for this formula is the *tukutukum* pattern (Example 4). As a rhythmic element (three eighth notes leading up to the first beat of a measure), the *tukutukum* can be used as a formulaic variation within formulas or function as a recurring part of a formula.

Clave

Cajón

Example 3: The original guarapachangueo formula. An “x” refers to an accented slap, in this case near the top corner of the cajón.

Clave

Cajón

Example 4: The *tukutukum* rhythm.

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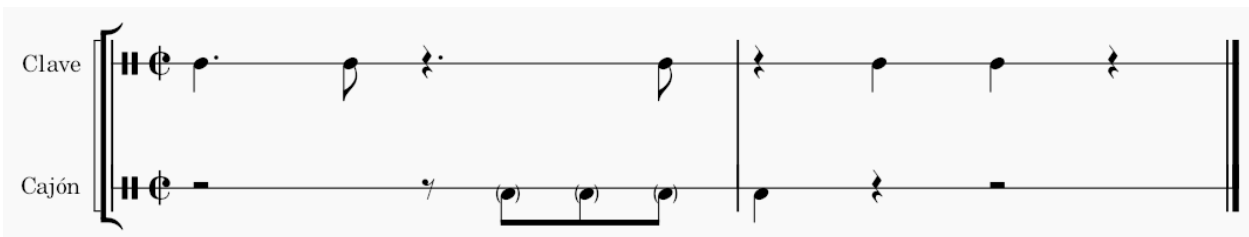
Notice that the first formula (Example 3) mimics the tres-dos part of traditional guaguancó (played as cajón slaps) and is anchored by an emphasis on the first beat of the clave. If this formula is adapted to a three-drummer format instead of the two-drummer format used by the Chinitos, the tres-dos will often play in the manner of traditional guaguancó, and the cajón/tumbador (often combined) will emphasize the first or second beat of the clave, both of which serve as important references, or anchor notes, in the timeline. The resulting structural formula (Example 5) is commonly used by the drummers of Yoruba Andabo and Rumberos de Cuba, and was popularized in the international scene via 1990s recordings such as *El callejón de los rumberos* and *Rapsodia rumbera*. Common variations with this formula include switching between emphasizing the first or second beat of the clave in the cajón, adding in the tukutukum, or adding an open tone on the tumbador (the latter two variations shown in parentheses in Example 5).

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Clave' and has a 3/4 time signature. It contains a sequence of notes: a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. The middle staff is labeled 'Tumbador' and also has a 3/4 time signature. It contains a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. The bottom staff is labeled 'Tres-dos' and has a 3/4 time signature. It contains a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. The notation includes various rhythmic values and rests, with parentheses indicating common variations for embellishment.

Example 5: A common formula with variations used in three-drummer formats. Parentheses indicate common variations for embellishment.

Note the amount of space opened up in the tumbador as compared with the formula for traditional guaguancó. This extra space, very characteristic of guarapachangueo, offers the quinto room to converse and results in a feeling of less stability in the low register. The extra space also allows the cajón/tumbador greater freedom to manipulate the building of energy in the form of tension and release. While not played every time, the cajón/tumbador will emphasize the *bombo* (the second note of the clave) frequently with a bass tone. As with the first beat of the clave, the cajón or tumbador can mark the bombo as a sort of anchor. The bombo and the first beat of the clave can even stand alone as structural formulas, and frequently serve as reference points—like anchor notes—or to close a phrase, as a period gives closure to a sentence. These anchor notes serve to provide release from accumulated tension and are built into a contemporary rumbero's vocabulary.

In some cases, the downbeat of the back side of the clave can serve as an anchor note in the cajón and be used as a formula, especially in two-drummer formats. It may have emerged out of the original guarapachangueo formula, which can be flipped in terms of its relationship with the clave. Piri demonstrates the formula in this manner (as a flipped version of Example 3) in his video demonstration of the structural formulas of guarapachangueo established by his family.²⁴ In practice however, many drummers replace the accented slap tones with unaccented inner beats for timekeeping and just emphasize the bass tone. As with the original formula, a common variation for embellishment here is the tukutukum pattern leading up to the primary bass tone (Example 6).



The image shows musical notation for two parts: Clave and Cajón. The Clave part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. It consists of two measures. The first measure contains a half note on G4, a quarter note on A4, and a quarter note on B4. The second measure contains a quarter note on C5, a quarter note on B4, a quarter note on A4, and a quarter note on G4. The Cajón part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. It consists of two measures. The first measure contains a half note on G2, a quarter note on A2, and a quarter note on B2. The second measure contains a quarter note on C3, a quarter note on B2, a quarter note on A2, and a quarter note on G2. A bracket underlines the notes G2, A2, and B2 in the first measure of the Cajón part, indicating the tukutukum pattern.

Example 6: Another common formula played on the low cajón or tumbador, particularly in two-drummer formats. The tukutukum is shown in parentheses.

The formula in Example 6 is commonly used by the Chinitos and two-drummer formats in general; in a way it can be seen as a minimalist approach to the traditional formula of the tres-dos, as the bass tone coincides with the first open tone of the latter. When I began rehearsing with La Nueva Timba de Cajón in the Bronx, both Andro Mella and Abi Holliday enjoyed and encouraged my use of this formula in the cajón. In Miami, I have seen Daniel González Gil, Alain Fernández, and other drummers use this formula in *cajones* and rumbas, perhaps employing it for a while (with variations) before switching to another formula. Example 7 comprises another popular formula derived from the Chinitos' two-drummer format.



The image shows musical notation for two parts: Clave and Tumbador/Cajón. The Clave part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. It consists of two measures. The first measure contains a half note on G4, a quarter note on A4, and a quarter note on B4. The second measure contains a quarter note on C5, a quarter note on B4, a quarter note on A4, and a quarter note on G4. The Tumbador/Cajón part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. It consists of two measures. The first measure contains a half note on G2, a quarter note on A2, and a quarter note on B2. The second measure contains a quarter note on C3, a quarter note on B2, a quarter note on A2, and a quarter note on G2.

Example 7: Formula for the tumbador/cajón in two- or three-drummer formats. Popular ways to vary this formula include playing the first muff as an open, replacing the second muff tone with a bass on the cajón, or replacing the final open tone with a double stroke (i.e. two open tone eight notes on beat four).

The notation for Example 9 consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Clave' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Tumbador/Cajón'. Both are in 2/4 time. The Clave staff has a first measure with a half note on the downbeat and a quarter note on the second beat, followed by a quarter rest and a quarter note on the second beat in the second measure. The Tumbador/Cajón staff has a first measure with a quarter rest, a quarter note on the second beat, a quarter rest, and a quarter note on the second beat in the second measure.

Example 9: Another of the Chinitos’ structural formulas.

To draw on an example from my experience in *cajones* (performing songs from the Spiritist repertoire), the drummer in the cajón/tumbador role may employ the formula in Example 9 to build and maintain a consistent, danceable energy to accompany a given song. Then, when the singer changes to *un canto picante* (i.e. a catchy, often short and well-known song chorus that elevates the energy and compels people to join the singing and dancing), the drummer can drop out abruptly and switch to a contrasting formula that heightens the tension with increased space and heavy accents. For example, another one of the Chinitos’ formulas commonly used by drummers, including the late Pancho Quinto, creates tension by dropping the bombo and opening up space in the low register—which can create a sense of the low end dropping out (Example 10). Further, the formula flirts with the anchor note of the first beat of the clave, sometimes accenting it but often displacing it, increasing the tension by offsetting it by an eighth note (i.e. accenting the “and” of one as opposed to the downbeat).

The notation for Example 10 is divided into two parts. The top part shows a six-measure phrase for Clave and Tumbador/Cajón. The Clave staff has a first measure with a quarter rest, a quarter note on the downbeat, and a quarter note on the second beat, followed by a quarter rest and a quarter note on the second beat in the second measure. The Tumbador/Cajón staff has a first measure with a quarter note on the downbeat, a quarter rest, and a quarter note on the second beat, followed by a quarter rest and a quarter note on the second beat in the second measure. The bottom part shows a six-measure phrase for Clave and Tumb./Caj. The Clave staff has a first measure with a quarter rest, a quarter note on the downbeat, and a quarter note on the second beat, followed by a quarter rest and a quarter note on the second beat in the second measure. The Tumb./Caj. staff has a first measure with a quarter rest, a quarter note on the downbeat, and a quarter note on the second beat, followed by a quarter rest and a quarter note on the second beat in the second measure.

Example 10: Sample phrasing and variations using another one of Pedro López’s formulas (first two measures). This formula can be used on a single cajón or tumbador, or both—as shown here—and can be varied with the use of open or muff tones, or replaced with all bass tones on the cajón.

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Tactics such as offsetting the downbeat or other expected note are common ways to vary a formula; they create tension by temporarily thwarting collective musical expectations, which are then provided with release when the drummer returns to an anchor note or more stable formula. Indeed, an important aspect of both drummers' and singers' roles in a rumba, *cajón*, tambor, or any other Afro-Cuban music event is the manipulation of bodily, psychic, and in many cases spiritual energy. A good singer must know how to build energy through a succession of songs, for example cycling between longer song choruses and those that are short and catchy. Part of being a good drummer is supporting the singer's progression rhythmically. For example, in a rumba group's performance, the building and progression of energy is part of entertaining your audience, but in a *cajón*, tambor, or other Afro-Cuban religious event, part of the job of the musicians is often to create the conditions necessary—through music and energy—to bring down an orisha (deity of Regla de Ocha) or a *muerto* (guardian spirit) into the head and body of a person.

Another mode of variation for drummers is to combine different formulas or repeat one several times to create a longer phrase, then close the phrase by marking a strong anchor note. This kind of creative process occurs repeatedly in rumba and other Afro-Cuban music traditions. Finally, aside from being competent in the vocabulary of guarapachangueo or any one of the Afro-Cuban traditions or specific styles, musicians will often cite the importance of *manana* or *bomba*, words referring to one's individual sense of soul that helps create the overall timba, the desirable groove of the music (Bodenheimer 2015).

Concluding Thoughts

I have by no means provided a comprehensive list of all the formulas and variations used in guarapachangueo, much less in the broader area of contemporary rumba. Aside from guarapachangueo, there are many other influences in contemporary rumba which have surfaced since the 1990s in Havana-style groups. For example, the influence of tambor is evident in Pancho Quinto's incorporation of batá drums and rhythms into the low register drum role, and Clave y Guaguancó's has similarly adapted rhythms from tambor, Abakuá, and other Cuban music traditions to the rumba ensemble. Contemporary popular music remains an important influence on rumberos as well, for example the use of rapped vocals or percussion breakdown sections rhythmically similar to the *bomba* and *pedal gears*²⁵ used by timba bands and reggaeton artists (Example 11). Finally, *conga* (carnival music), and other Afro-Cuban traditions like *makuta* and *iyésá* continue to serve as sources of rhythmic vocabularies and inspirations for songs, as many rumberos are exposed to or involved in their performance.

The image shows musical notation for two instruments: Clave and Cajón. Both are in 2/4 time. The Clave part consists of a sequence of notes: a quarter note on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, a quarter rest on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, a quarter rest on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, a quarter note on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, a quarter rest on the first beat, and a quarter note on the second beat. The Cajón part consists of a quarter rest on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, a quarter note on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, a quarter rest on the first beat, and a quarter note on the second beat. The notation is enclosed in a large bracket on the right side.

Example 11: A common structural formula for a breakdown section used when the singer switches song choruses during the *montuno* (call and response section of a rumba) and the normal drum parts drop out. Variations on this formula can be heard on the recordings of Iroso Obbá, Osain del Monte, and Yoruba Andabo, among others.

I believe that analyzing rumba as a musical language with continually evolving conventions, vocabularies, and formulas, brings us much closer to what is happening inside the mind of a *rumbero*. We can distinguish the presence of a personal, inner library that shapes the musical habitus of a performer. Distinguishing between improvisation and formulaic variation makes it easier to understand how and why *rumberos* make the musical decisions they do, as opposed to attributing huge swaths of the musical process to free choice. While I do not claim to have provided an ultimate definition of *guarapachangueo*, I do believe such an analysis of *guarapachangueo* will prove fruitful for documenting and identifying its presence more clearly in contemporary rumba.

Notes

¹Although their surnames are López Rodríguez, they are known as the Chinitos (“Chinese”) because some of their ancestry is Chinese.

² Rumba groups and musicians from Matanzas, another regional hub of rumba performance, exhibit less pronounced rhythmic influence from *guarapachangueo* and thus will not be a focus of my discussion.

³ For a more detailed history of rumba, see Frías (2014). Other literature on rumba history includes Crook (1992), Martínez Rodríguez (1998), Mestas Alfonso (2020), Moliner Castañeda and Gutiérrez Rodríguez (1987), and Sublette (2004).

⁴ In informal rumbas, various singers often interchange many song verses before going into the *montuno* (call-and-response section), which in turn can be extended indefinitely. My godfather Alain Fernández, *rumbero* and *akpón* (singer of the orisha repertory), who grew up two doors down from the Chinitos, has told me how he would watch the *rumberos* there go back and forth exchanging verses from popular *boleros* (i.e. sung over the rumba rhythms). Conversely, rumba on recordings and stage presentations tends to feature a succinct verse-chorus (i.e. *canto-montuno*) structure.

⁵ See chapter one of Frías (2019) for a history of commercial recordings of rumba.

⁶ See Crook (1982) for an overview of the standardized parts for traditional rumba.

⁷ See Bodenheimer (2015) for a history of *guarapachangueo* as recounted by Los Chinitos. Two documentaries featuring interviews with Los Chinitos regarding the history and musical features of the style have also been produced by Italian students of theirs: “[Los Chinitos: Mi](#)

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[rumba de corazón](#),” filmed by Marco Fadda and Marika Pellegrini in 2003, and “[Rumba Guarapachanguero Concept and History, Los Chinitos](#),” filmed by Antoine Miniconi in 2011.

⁸ Among performers of Afro-Cuban traditional music, *tambor* (short for *tambor de fundamento*) refers to the several things: the consecrated batá drums, the event in which they perform, and their musical repertoire, including the drum rhythms and the sets of ordered songs (*tratados*) that the drumming accompanies. The term is thus more comprehensive than a reference to “batá drumming,” and reflects the vocabulary of tamboleros (i.e. batá drummers).

⁹ Abbilona refers to the name of a project featuring some of the Chinitos family and their cohort of tamboleros; they recorded a set of commercial recordings of *tambor* beginning in the 1990s which continue to be highly influential among tamboleros, particularly in Havana and in *tambor* scenes outside Cuba (Frías 2019).

¹⁰ Tambolero meaning as a professional batá drummer. Alain is a well-respected *akpón* (singer of the orisha repertoire) in the Afro-Cuban religious music scene and the owner of the *tambor de fundamento* (set of consecrated batá drums) that I am sworn to.

¹¹ Recently, Charley Rivas and I, both based in Miami and proponents of the Chinitos’ *guarapachanguero* style, collaborated with Puerto Rico-based Beto Torrens and members of his Liga Rumbera. Charley and I recorded the drum parts in the Chinitos’ style, accompanying singers Totin Agosto and Ernesto Gatell “El Gato,” the latter a well-respected Cuban *rumbero* who now resides in Florida. Some of those tracks are still being mixed, but some of the Chinitos-inspired tracks are available online in the album *Orgánico y medicinal* (2019).

¹² Fiebre Latina TV, “La cafeteria – Yoruba Andabo – Tu caliente pero no cuela – Rumba,” February 18, 2018, <https://youtu.be/1yypFVnSHhc>.

¹³ For clarity, I will italicize the word *cajón* (or plural, *cajones*) when referring to the event. Alternatively, I will not italicize the word when referring to the instrument called the cajón.

¹⁴ In this context, a güiro refers to a musical ceremony in Santería in which songs are accompanied by two or three shekeres (hollow gourds covered in beads), a *guataca* (hoe blade) struck with a metal beater, and a tumbadora.

¹⁵ See “Los Chinito Cajon en la Corea,” November 13, 2013, <https://youtu.be/Pha5y5VsGS4>.

¹⁶ See “Guarapachanguero los chinitos de San Miguel del Padrón,” <https://youtu.be/yv3tWZ40EeA> and videos on Manley López’s YouTube channel.

¹⁷ Examples include “El Duo Peligroso de La Habana de Hoy – Parte 1,” <https://youtu.be/Sqkg7FasvQg>, and “Si Somos de la Caliente – TIMBA ENCENDIDA,” <https://youtu.be/hWyCGU6UoBE>, which also feature Michael Herrera Perez and Barbarito Crespo Richa.

¹⁸ Ideals of maintaining tradition (i.e adherence to long-established formulas) are often expressed by rumberos and tamboleros in phrases such as “don’t wander too far from the base [rhythmic formula]” or “embellish, but return [to the base].”

¹⁹ See Frías 2019 for a detailed discussion of the history and influence of rumba recordings.

²⁰ See Keil (1994) for a discussion of resistance, tension, and gratification as it pertains to rhythm and meter.

²¹ For example, certain individuals will be more inclined to improvise due to their personal preferences or to their level of experience. Some contexts with lower stakes or with the purpose of experimentation, such as informal spaces or percussion jam sessions, may be more favorable to higher amounts of improvisation than contexts with higher stakes, as in a studio recording or a religious event like a *cajón*, but it still often comes down to individual choice.

²² Antoine Miniconi, “Rumba Guarapachangueo, Concept and History, Los Chinitos,” February 2011, <https://youtu.be/K8n3GRB1Ks0>.

²³ The Chinitos’ characteristic pyramid-shaped cajón with protruding “ears” (*orejas*) on the side, the latter used for slaps or inner-beats played with fingers.

²⁴ Manley López, “Rumba Guarapachangueo, clase con Manley Lopez (Piri), Los Chinitos,” March 15, 2011, <https://youtu.be/nC1nvERm9-I>.

²⁵ See Kevin Moore’s explanation of gears in *timba* at https://www.timba.com/artist_pages/gears-what-where-and-how.

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