



## Company Info

### **Contact Information:**

Omo Aché Afro-Cuban Music & Dance Co.  
Juan Carlos Blanco Riera, Director  
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### **About the Company:**

*Omo Aché* is an Afro-Cuban folkloric company that preserves the traditional dances, songs, music and stories of Cuba. The company offers audiences a journey through the evolution of Cuban culture, from its African roots to today's most popular urban expressions. Members of *Omo Aché* include Cuban and local artists dedicated to the ethnographic investigation of traditional Afro-Cuban cultural arts under the guidance of master folklorist and director Juan Carlos Blanco Riera.

Mr. Blanco takes pride in cultivating a deep understanding of this cultural art form in his company members by emphasizing historical context, precision, spirit and character. Each dancer, singer and percussionist must not only learn the proper technique but also the intent of the expression in order to clearly and powerfully communicate its essence. As a group, *Omo Aché* strives to embody the wisdom of this rich culture with passion, unity, respect and integrity.

*Omo Aché* offers a variety of performances to educational and artistic venues where multi-cultural perspectives are valued. The company performs regularly in universities, community colleges, and community festivals throughout California. Most recently *Omo Aché* performed at the *Cuba Caribe Festival* in San Francisco; at the *Afro-Latino Festival* at the Museum of Latin American Art in Los Angeles; and at the *Nations International Dance Festival* in San Diego.

The name of the company comes from Lucumi, the Yoruba language as it has been preserved in Cuba. *Omo* means children and *Aché* is positive spiritual energy that brings good fortune. Mr. Blanco chose this name to recognize the importance of the youth in the preservation and development of culture- "*Omo Aché* are our blessed children, our hope, and our future. Let us cultivate their minds, bodies and spirits so that they may blossom while rooted in the traditions passed down through the generations."

Mr. Blanco has been teaching youth in schools throughout San Diego as artist in residence for over 10 years. He has collaborated with credentialed educators to develop a standards-based curriculum for Kindergarten through 12th grade that introduces students to Cuban cultural arts through music and dance. Mr. Blanco has also taught at the community college and university levels as guest lecturer and Master Artist. His approach to teaching engages the mind, body and spirit, encourages personal connections, expands social and cultural awareness, and cultivates understanding of multiple perspectives. More importantly, his residencies teach students that music, dance and cultural arts are an essential expression of humanity.

Omo Aché Afro-Cuban Music & Dance Co. offers a variety of quality professional services for schools, universities and cultural organizations. Packages are flexible and tailored to the needs of the client.

For inquiries or bookings please contact: Juan Carlo Blanco Riera, Director  
[omoache@earthlink.net](mailto:omoache@earthlink.net), 858-551-1069

### Performances

- Length can vary from 10 minutes to one hour
- Live dance, percussion, music & storytelling
- Includes between 5 to 12 performers
- Programs and written educational materials available

### Technical Needs:

- Stage area at least 30' x 20'
- Stage floor must be shaded, raised and smooth
- Dressing room area accessible from stage for quick changes
- Microphones (at least 3) and sound system

### Education- Community College & University

- Workshops
- Lecture/ Demonstrations
- Master Classes

### Education- Schools K-12<sup>th</sup>

- In-school residencies
- After-school programs
- Assemblies
- Teacher in-services

### Disciplines:

- Dance
- Percussion
- Song
- Cultural history

### *Areas of Study:*

- Afro-Cuban Folkloric Traditions
  - Yoruba (from present day Nigeria)
  - Arará (from the Dahome tribes of present day Benin & Togo)
  - Congo (from the Bantu speaking tribes of present day Angola)
  - Franco-Haitian (from the Bantu speaking tribes of present day Angola via Haiti)
- Cuban Traditions
  - Rumba including Guaguancó, Yambú & Columbia
  - Comparsa or Conga
- Cuban Popular
  - Son
  - Mambo
  - Cha Cha Chá
  - Casino (Rueda de Casino)

## **La Roye: El Creador de Caminos (The Creator of Paths)**

This work highlights the child-like character of *Elegua*, an *Orisha* (deity) of the *Yoruba* pantheon. He is represented as a mischievous young boy who plays in the forested mountains. *Elegua* occupies the very important role of messenger for the supreme god *Olofi*. Always a trickster, *Elegua* has the power to open and close paths in life with his *garabato*, or hooked branch. He is found at all crossroads and is always honored as the first *Orisha* to arrive and the last to leave at all *Yoruba* ceremonies.

## **Afrekete: La Madre Eterna (The Eternal Mother)**

As an *Orisha* of the *Yoruba* pantheon, *Yemaya* is the universal mother who controls the power of the ocean and possesses a serious, protective, and proud character. Departing from *Yoruba* land, *Yemaya* journeys to the land of the *Arará* where upon her arrival, she is met by a starving and needy population. She fishes in the depths of her ocean bringing food and sustenance to the people. In gratitude for her generous actions, the *Arará* nation bestows upon her the name *Afrekete*, honoring her as their eternal mother and caretaker.

## **Gagá: Monton Polo**

During Haiti's revolution a wave of immigrants departed to seek refuge in the neighboring island of Cuba. These people, called *Franco-Haitians*, settled in communities in the Eastern part of Cuba where they continue to preserve their culture, religion, language and customs. *Gagá* is a *Franco-Haitian* dance of *Bantu* origin that is used to travel from one community to another during festive periods. It is a very energetic expression where dancers demonstrate their skills and strength with a carnivalesque flair.

## **Rumba: Una Celebración a la Vida (A Celebration of Life)**

Rumba blends both African and Spanish influences to create a uniquely Cuban expression of life. *Guaguancó* is one of the more vivacious styles of Rumba involving a dynamic battle of the sexes. In *Guaguancó*, the man and woman play a flirtatious game that can be traced back to the *Bantu* dance of *Makuta* where dancers imitate the courtship between the rooster and the hen. Here the man attempts to "conquer" his partner with a movement called the *vacunao*, while the woman provokes and protects herself with equal tenacity.

## **Criumba Congo**

The *Congo* nation in Cuba traces its origins in the *Bantu* speaking nation tribes from the mouth of the Congo River basin. Their religion, *Palo Monte*, venerates nature as well as the spirit of their ancestors. The *Congo* people believe that their spiritual strength is derived from their physical connection to the earth. In this piece two *Congo* groups happen upon each other in the forest. Each group, suspicious of the other, decides to challenge strength with the warrior dance – *Palo*. Discovering that they descend from the same origins, they unite to become a greater force. A *Makuta* dance follows where the *Congo* people celebrate their daily lives as they work and recreate.

## **Cuban Popular Dance: Son, ChaChaChá, Mambo & Casino**

Cubans have always embraced artistic expression as a part of their national identity. In fact, Cuban creativity has been a source for inspiration throughout the world. Dances and musical styles that organically grew out of the dance halls of this island have swept globe, influencing dances from Ballroom to Hip Hop. This piece honors the original forms of these dances as they were created and continue to be practiced by Cubans today.

## **Comparsa: El Carnaval**

Once a year Cuban's celebrate *Carnaval* with highly spirited parades symbolizing community pride. Cubans of all walks of life organize in community-based groups called, *Comparsas*, to formally participate in these celebrations through friendly competitions. *Comparsas* represent the unity of a neighborhood, school or workplace where members collaborate all year preparing stunning costumes, creating elaborate choreographies, composing clever lyrics, and synchronizing tight rhythms. *Carnaval* traces back to pre-Lenten celebrations when slave owners allowed African nations to openly represent their culture through music and dance.

## ***Company Members:***

Juan Carlos Blanco, Director & Choreographer  
Reynaldo Atesiano Matos, Percussionist  
Angelica Cardona, Dancer & Singer  
Araceli Carrera, Dancer  
Monique Gaffney, Dancer  
Irene Pulli, Dancer  
Roxanne Rojas de Blanco, Dancer  
Claudia Restrepo, Dancer  
Lorena Santana, Dancer  
Geronimo Tarrango-Mims, Percussionist  
Naiche Tarrango-Mims, Percussionist  
Menelike Turner, Percussionist

## ***Director's Biography:***

Juan Carlos Blanco Riera was born and raised in Havana, Cuba, where he performed with several professional companies for over 15 years before coming to the U.S. As a youth, he started his dance career with the community based folkloric arts groups *Cumballé* and *Oba Ilú* in his hometown of Guanabacoa, both directed by founder of the *Conjunto Folklorico Nacional*, Oriol Bustamante. He later on joined one of Cuba's most respected folkloric companies *Raices Profundas* ("deep roots"), directed by Juan de Dios Ramos. He spent 9 years with *Raices Profundas* rising to the level of lead male soloist and touring Latin American and Asia.

Mr. Blanco's desire to deepen and broaden his knowledge of his cultural expression drove him to become involved with several diverse arts groups in Havana. He performed with *Teatro de la Havana* in a number of theatrical plays including *De mi Tierra Vengo*, *Maria Antonia*, *Santa Camila de la Havana Vieja*, and *Requipo por Yarini*. He danced, acted and choreographed with *Arte Popular*, a popular theatre company directed by Tito Junco. Mr. Blanco performed with the innovative modern dance company *Alabama*. He also spent several years working with the Franco-Haitian company *Ban Rra Rrá*, directed by Isaias Rojas Ramirez, as percussionist and instructor of Afro-Cuban dance.

While in Cuba, he was charged with the responsibility of training both professional Cuban dancers and educating foreign students through the *Instituto Superior de Arte* and the *Escuela Nacional de Arte*. He was artistic director of the folkloric ensemble *Arawe* that toured Peru in 1997. He also choreographed several productions in Havana including "*Afro-Perú*", a collaboration with Peruvian singer Argelia Fragoso, and "*Trilogia*", produced with *Raices Profundas*.

Since coming to the United States, Mr. Blanco has been featured in various Afro-Cuban productions in the California area as dancer and guest choreographer for groups such as *Olorun*, *Alafia*, and *Taifa*. He founded his own Afro-Cuban company, *Omo Aché*, in 1998, which has performed in schools, universities, and multi-cultural venues throughout California. Most recently *Omo Aché* has performed at the *Cuba Caribe Festival* in San Francisco; at Towson University in Baltimore; at the *Afro-Latino Festival* at the Museum of Latin American Art in Los Angeles; and at the *Nations International Dance Festival* in San Diego.

Mr. Blanco has taught Afro-Cuban percussion and dance to adults through community classes and institutions such as UCSD, UCLA, Palomar College, Grossmont College, San Diego City College, Cal State San Marcos, and Humboldt State University. He has also traveled throughout the United States teaching master workshops in states of Michigan, Arizona, Maryland, Oregon and Illinois. He taught Afro-Cuban music and dance to children through the Institute for Arts Education and City Moves. He spent 6 years teaching Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at the King-Chavez Academies, presenting their work at community celebrations and festivals throughout San Diego.