

ALLURE IN CUBA

On the tropical island where Africa meets Spain, where magic and Marxism mingle, beauty is about invention, fueled by the baroque twists of the Cuban imagination.

By Elizabeth Hanly

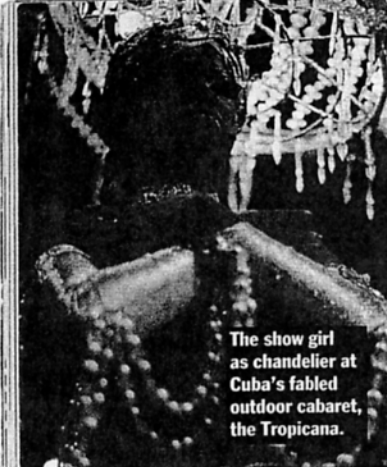
The chic-est place to be on a Saturday night in Havana is a vast open-air ice cream parlor, a UFO look-alike, just across the street from the Havana Libre hotel in the center of town. Young people congregate, a few with lilac Mohawks. Some women are in evening dress, others wear billowing white in homage to their African gods. Gentlemen in *guayaberas*, classic linen dress shirts, eye women's backsides soulfully. Ice cream is all but forgotten in the riot of chatter and flirtation. Meanwhile, the 1989 Cuban film *La Bella del Alhambra* is projected on a wall of the hotel. *La Bella*, starring young Cuban actress Beatriz Valdéz, chronicles the loves and losses of a cabaret singer at the turn of the century. The movie has been projected on hills and mountains in small towns all over the island. Even so, Cubans can't get enough of its heroine—she who conjures up the *conquistadora*, the vulnerable, playful temptress of Cuban legend. Now *La Bella* is wearing a silly soldier's hat, a silk teddy, and no bra. She licks her lips. It's a hot tropical night. "Cover me, I'm cold," Valdéz sings, and everybody sighs. "We need to recover full-bloom the Cuban tradition of the whore, the *conquistadora*," says another up-and-coming actress, Lilian Rentería.

To understand Cuba and the *conquistadora*, one must turn to Ochún, the whore-goddess of the Yoru-


ban faith, symbol of beauty and romance in that African religion. None of the deep changes wrought by 32 years of Communism have altered Ochún's symbolic power. For Cuba is a place where magic and Marxism mingle, just as Africa and Spain, Yoruban funk and Catholic dogma have collided in the past. Cubans casually accept these contradictions.

If the permissiveness of Batista's era has been replaced by Fidel Castro's Marxist discipline, the process has taken place on an island bathed all day long in lilac and lime light. Certainly the revolution has touched every aspect of Cuban life. The reality of it is obvious in vastly improved health care and education systems, but also in long lines for food, fuel, even rum—a result of economic crisis in the Communist world. One sees signs all over the island decreeing "socialism or death." But the aesthetics of hard-line social realism could never have taken root in this landscape. At night the island seems to lose its shape, becoming utterly soft, smattered with lovers pushed against wrought-iron fences.

For four centuries, Cuba has incorporated the fashion and beauty codes of Europe. Through it all, the Cuban look has remained unique, thanks to certain baroque twists: more gold in the makeup, more ruffles flamboyant bracelets and earrings, extremes of color "All through our history we've invented," say Lourdes Martí, head of Cuba's Contex design house "Otherwise the island would simply fall into the sea. This is a culture of extravagant imagination." I though




The show girl as chandelier at Cuba's fabled outdoor cabaret, the Tropicana.



Shaped, arched, sometimes squared, dramatic eyebrows enhance expressive Cuban eyes.



Actress Lilian Rentería at a luncheon during the internationally renowned Havana film festival.



A member of the dance troupe Grupo Folklórico, dressed in the yellow of Ochún, the Yoruban goddess of beauty.

of a girl I had seen that morning; she wore a white sugarcane sack encrusted with seashells.

This imagination is busily coping with the country's current blistering round of shortages. Cuban women like to be pretty; every Cuban will tell you that, smirking at the understatement. Shortages of cosmetics are a problem.

In their efforts to improvise, Cuban women have melted down raspberry pink or orange plastic tumblers when there was no nail polish on hand and substituted shoe polish for mascara to accentuate their predominantly green eyes. "Young girls are desperate to turn 15," says model Taimi Chappe. "At that age traditionally they become women and can begin to wear makeup, even if they need to invent it." The women seem oblivious to the possible dangers of their innovations. Cubans have retained their 1950s fascination with blonds. Women sometimes apply household bleach directly to their hair or sew together chicken feathers to make platinum wigs. By now all Cubans know that a popular laxative can double as hair mousse. Water boiled with carbon paper can rinse away the gray. Tin from a roof becomes hair rollers. Earrings can be made with the filaments of burned-out light bulbs. Lace from an old petticoat becomes a turban. Plain cotton dresses are tie-dyed not with paints, because Cuba has a shortage of paints, but with medicines, which postrevolutionary Cuba usually has in ample supply. Shoes can be woven from burlap with somebody's grandmother's heels from the 1940s tacked on, or they can be heavy flat imports from Eastern Europe speckled with Dad's old cuff links.

Despite the crisis of the revolution, there has never been an absence of gold paper to cut into minute particles, mix with egg whites or sugar, and apply to hair and shoulders, even the thighs and buttocks. Perhaps a lipstick is a dreadful pink from Bulgaria that's all wrong for darker complexions; eyeliners or even lead pencils are mixed in and the pink turns scarlet. Eye shadow may have to be combined with that of friends and neighbors to create any viable shade, let alone that lilac, so like the island's light, that Cuban women love. (This habit of sharing is perhaps one of the up sides of what a poet told me most disturbed her about Cuba: "The utter lack of secrets, everyone intimate with everyone else's life.")

Making fashion statements requires equal ingenuity. Seventy percent of Cuba's cloth goes into uniforms—military, school, and service. As for imports, trading partners like China produce very ugly clothes. Never before have resources been so low or high-fashion news from Europe and America so limited. Women's magazines continued after the revolution but focused more on Pap tests, literacy,

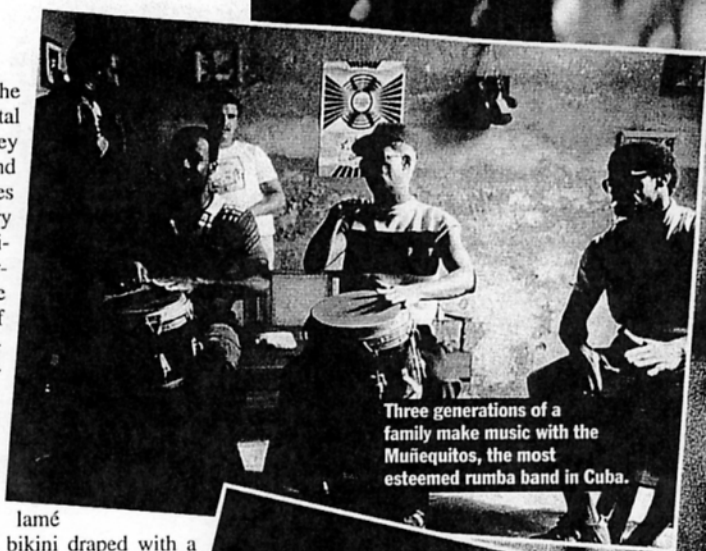
child nutrition, and the undoing of often brutal machismo than they did on fashion and beauty. Pop images from contemporary American movies (pirated) seen on Saturday-night TV have filled in only a bit of the gap, often in jumbled context. Imagination has turned in on itself. The result is that anything goes. Satin Kewpie-doll dresses. A Rita Hayworth-esque silver lamé gown gone mini. A bikini draped with a Spanish shawl. Lycra bicycle shorts with a ruffled Carmen Miranda top. Cuba's current-day fashion inventions often contain a hint of Miami. Sometimes women who once were proud not to have any family in exile in the U.S. soften their patriotism once the care packages—the turquoise Lycra pedal pushers—begin arriving from Miami.

"Look at what we can do when we have to invent everything in sight," says Lilian Rentería. "Imagine if we had anything really to do it with."

Young girls and their families still manage to assemble the requisite five outfits—formal attire to swimwear—for their photographs at the *quince*, the hallowed rite-of-passage party in celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday. If invention fails, the state provides stores: One, aptly named *La Ilusión*, rents frothy dresses in Easter-egg pastels. And the revolution's daughters, just home, perhaps, from a spate of volunteer construction work in the hills, assume languid postures in their *quince* gowns.

"To be beautiful in Cuba is to be holy," says an old woman sitting next to me on a bus. Rita Delgado isn't speaking metaphorically. She is one of those Cubans you meet everywhere who begin telling you which spirits surround you as casually as we in the States check dates in a *Filofax*. The spiritual is tangible on this island. And among the most sacred influences on Cuban men as well as women is *Ochún*, the Yoruban goddess of beauty.

Every weekend, communities come together to celebrate the old African faith. A few celebrants work drums and bells; the rest move in a highly synchronized dance to the rhythm. (Each god has



Three generations of a family make music with the Muñequitos, the most esteemed rumba band in Cuba.




A present-day promotional sign for the Tropicana.



A Cuban ideal pushed to the point of parody: The extravagantly decorated body of a dancer at the Tropicana.



A scene from 1950s nightlife in Havana, then described as "the sexiest town in the world."



A performer from Grupo Folklórico presents traditional Afro-Cuban dance.

"We Cubans, if we could, would change our look, our clothes, ourselves, three times a day."



Cuban women have a taste for bright colors in clothing—swimwear is no exception.

his or her own rhythm and dance.) At a certain point, one of the dancers falls into a trance, a signal that he or she has been possessed by one of the gods. According to legend, Ochún moves in a perfumed haze surrounded by peacocks and canaries. Always the sybarite, she also remains the sublime warrior. Almost everybody, male or female, describes Ochún and her contradictory nature as the paradigm for the Cuban female. Like Ochún, Cuban women are serious flirts. Hispanicized, Ochún became not only a Creole incarnation of the Holy Virgin but the patroness of Cuba. Her church in Santiago is the site of pilgrimages. Each day her chapel is filled with tens of thousands of roses. So important is Ochún to Cubans that the exile community in Miami has built its own version of her church.

The dance to call the lady down from the spirit realm includes mimed gestures of women combing their curls, painting their lips. Skirts are lifted lasciviously high as the dancers exchange lingering sidelong glances. Ochún's dance is done, the homage paid, her boons requested by men and women alike. The toughest male begins the dance of Ochún, and his body softens, and briefly becomes feminine.

Ochún roams among the crowd in the body of a devotee in a trance, offering advice to this one or that. Rarely, if ever, is she interviewed. Still, Ochún, through her medium, consents to talk one Saturday at the home of a maker of sacred drums. I ask her what is most important to her, what she finds most beautiful. She answers, "*Sandunga*"—a way of walking, an undulating sway that involves the whole body. That movement, she says, is her gift to Cuban women. "A silent song that begins with the ankle and continues just past the ass," Ochún calls it.

The worship of Ochún includes beauty rituals—baths of honey, egg whites, and sunflower blossoms, which are meant to leave one irresistible and spiritually adjusted. After participating in these rites, one begins to understand the resonance of certain Cuban values. "Another culture may treasure a fine wine. For us it's the ritual of the rosewater washing of our hair. Often we do this by candlelight. Our men may watch," Rentería says.

Cubans are vain. In fact, vanity is honored in Cuba. "I saw a pregnant woman go off to labor with curlers in her hair so that after the ordeal she could meet her child properly," says photographer Marta María Pérez. Scarcities notwithstanding, state mental hospitals urge patients to receive

weekly pedicures and manicures—with blood-red polish. On the street, a woman will have a flower in her hair even if she's wearing her grandfather's Sammy Davis Jr. hat.


"We Cubans, if we could, would change our look, our clothes, ourselves, three times a day," says Lourdes Martí. "It's all about our frenzy to communicate." Psychologist Isabel Sánchez goes further. "Even the youngest children here have this need to transform themselves. It's part of a whole cluster of spiritual concerns that penetrate even the political life of Cuba: a kaleidoscopic need to be part of something greater than oneself."

Sandunga is not only in Ochún's dance; it is on the street. In Cuba, dancing rivals baseball as the national pastime. In addition to their native cha-cha, rumba, mambo, and bugaloo, Cubans claim they even had the lambada 350 years ago. On Sunday afternoons at La Tropical, a popular open-air cabaret in Havana, the old folks gather. Their moves—thigh to thigh, those tight spins—are utterly fluid. On Saturday nights, a band called Los VanVan sometimes plays. Lead singer Pedrito invites one choice young thing after another up on stage until finally he has his own chorus line, all partaking of the venerable rumba tradition of penis (Pedrito's) to ass rubdown. Occasionally Pedrito, who is black and dresses like a colonial sugar lord, pauses to marvel at the rhythm of one of his dancers. One sees women walking with the same rhythm all over Cuba.

Sandunga would not be sandunga without that cornerstone of Cuban beauty, the ass. "I wouldn't say the Cuban ass is always better, but it's always bigger," says Osvaldo Salas, who has photographed Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and many of Hollywood's other great beauty queens. As we talk I notice that the marble swan next to us in the hotel lobby has a woman's buttocks. Painter Minerva López tells of her ex-husband's return to Havana after several months in Algeria. "Ah, to see again the asses of my island." The physician was crying. "A woman without one is a garden without the flowers." National campaigns to diminish sexual stereotyping aside, Cuban women routinely take in the waists of their jeans and uniforms to further outline nature. Physical therapist Ana Fernández is convinced that "without asses in motion, we would never achieve the degree of feeling we have here."

This heritage comes to a mad climax at the Tropicana, the famed cabaret of Cuba's prerevolutionary pleasure-dome days. Show girls still occasionally dress as chandeliers (they do, in fact, light up). Bells tremble over private parts; beads drip from breasts like sour balls. A group of trainees gather around me. "We're statuettes," they say, meaning those who stand ei-

**"Our sexuality
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With nails painted and hair in curlers, a woman is trained for the civil militia—serving vanity even as she serves her country.

ther in the background, in the trees around the stage, or within the easy grasp of men at the tables, and simply shake. The Tropicana may be a cartoon of deep Cuban values, but there is something magnificently unequivocal about the laughter when I ask these young women if in today's Cuba men still pursue them.

"Our sexuality at times can seem at odds with our revolutionary ideals," says Leonor Rodríguez, a senior official from Cuba's Permanent Assembly of Women. She describes socialist representatives from Europe and Africa visiting the Tropicana and coming away appalled. But Rodríguez defends the tradition and says she is "more concerned about whether a divorced man continues child support than any number of feathers rising from a woman's head. We've all grown up some." Lourdes Martí asks me, in turn, "What law says a coquette can't be an effective militant? Could any orthodox really break this island's humor, its sexuality?"

Leaving aside any sexual element, the physical body in Cuba has a presence that is lost in the States. "Perhaps our genius is our ability to communicate with our bodies," says Alicia Alonso, who heads the National Ballet of Cuba. Though in her 70s, she continues her performances. Her choreography spins conga lines into classic nineteenth-century choruses. In 1947, Alonso danced for Balanchine. The master was so taken with the young soloist's gifts that, as she recollects, "he put aside his ideas of abstraction and allowed me to 'converse' with my partner on stage." Photographer Salas speaks similarly about communication. He has planned an essay on Cuban hands—"those educated both by flamenco and the equally intricate deliberations of sacred Yoruban dance."

Manuel Mendive, an initiate in the old Yoruban religion and an artist who has become a European celebrity, takes this body communication a few steps further: He paints the bodies of his dancers. Lizards run down forearms, a face appears on a buttock, penises grow down spines, eyes flash from breasts as bodies stretch. Mendive fleshes out a unity, breaking down not only male-female distinctions but also those between man and animal. The body becomes the metaphysical vehicle of choice in Cuba. "Only by using my body as subject can I be as direct as I need to be," says photographer Pérez.

Cubans seem always to be touching, to be in concert. Kids are wrapped around each other as they fish from the trees above the bay. People embrace on bicycles and buses, as well as in wet sand on beaches. There are no spas on the island but many springs, frequented mostly by the old and infirm, who cover themselves with

black mud as an arthritic treatment. But it's the yellow mud that is "more effective for beauty than Ochún's honey," says the ancient María Méndez as she packs it all over me. We are at Elguea, a rough-hewn treatment center a few hours from Havana. At the end of the day everybody comes together at the "shampoo spring" to wash the mud away. Strangers straddle each other to help. An old man smiles. "This is what it was like," he says, "when your family gathered to wash you when you were very, very little."

Besides building roads to some of these



The Cathedral of Havana

"I wouldn't say the Cuban ass is always better, but it's always bigger," says photographer Osvaldo Salas.

springs, Cuba's revolution sought to democratize ice cream parlors and hair salons. There are about 100 state-run beauty shops in Havana alone, many of them housed in the oligarchy's now-crumbling wedding-cake palaces. An appointment can be had on one day's notice. Hair tinting costs just over a dollar. Cuban women continue to delight in changing their hair color, even with the current harsh dyes.

Delia Montavo was Josephine Baker's hairdresser both in Havana and in Paris. Baker gave her the cash to start one of the few integrated prerevolutionary salons in Havana, even

though Delia had declined Baker's brother's offer of marriage. ("He was too ugly," Montavo says.) For years Montavo has worked with dance and theater companies. She also teaches at the Institute of Beauty but still receives a few friends at home. There are thousands of such living-room salons in Cuba. As we talk, she braids my waist-length hair into at least 400 *trecitas*, the tiny braids one sees everywhere against the endless range of Cuban skin colors. "Have you ever had a black lover?" she asks. It takes her maybe six seconds to get to the question. Once that is settled, we are friends.

She tells me of Cuba's classic novel, *Cecilia Valdés*, the story of a *mulata* white enough to cross color lines. In the old days, white women would come to Montavo for magic, desperate with jealousy over *mulata* mistresses. For generations color has been a preoccupation in Cuba. But racism has softened, Montavo says, as has day-to-day life for the poor. In another era, many women were too destitute even to imagine buying a lipstick. "Invention had more to do with survival then," she says.

Taimi Chappe, the up-and-coming, very black Cuban model and female world champion in fencing, speaks for a younger generation. "After all the backbreaking early years of the revolution, it's time for us to recover our tradition as women." Indeed, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, one of the island's favorite filmmakers, suggests that for all its hair salons, the revolution may have pressed women to become at least a little tougher than they would like to be. Innumerable psychologists, sociologists, and party members talk of postrevolutionary Cuban women coming out of their homes en masse for the first time. They talk about a revolutionary version of the superwoman complex. Regardless of their gold confetti, Cuban women are tired.

The whole island is weary. Cubans have good reason to yearn for easier, more settled times. Yet the picture of Cuban beauty, the proud transpersonal effort fueled by imagination, comes clear, and more movingly so, despite all the privations.

In these difficult times, Havana is still irresistible. One has to get out into the electricity of the "city of columns," as renowned writer Alejo Carpentier has described the capital. It's Sunday morning. On a bench in the Paseo del Prado, a woman with deep orange lips and great curving Chinese eyes wraps her man in her curls. A girl with fuchsia lipstick and ebony skin rides by on a bicycle. She wears a rhinestone anklet. A face out of Goya framed by long black hair moves past bodegas strewn with Florentine tile and valentines. Later, an hour or so outside the city, I see cane fields burning at dusk after a harvest—the sky all mauve, dark pink, pearl gray. Those colors, blurred over the gold skin of a woman in white, are reflected in her silver bracelets. She could have been La Bella.

The *conquistadora* is doing just fine. ●