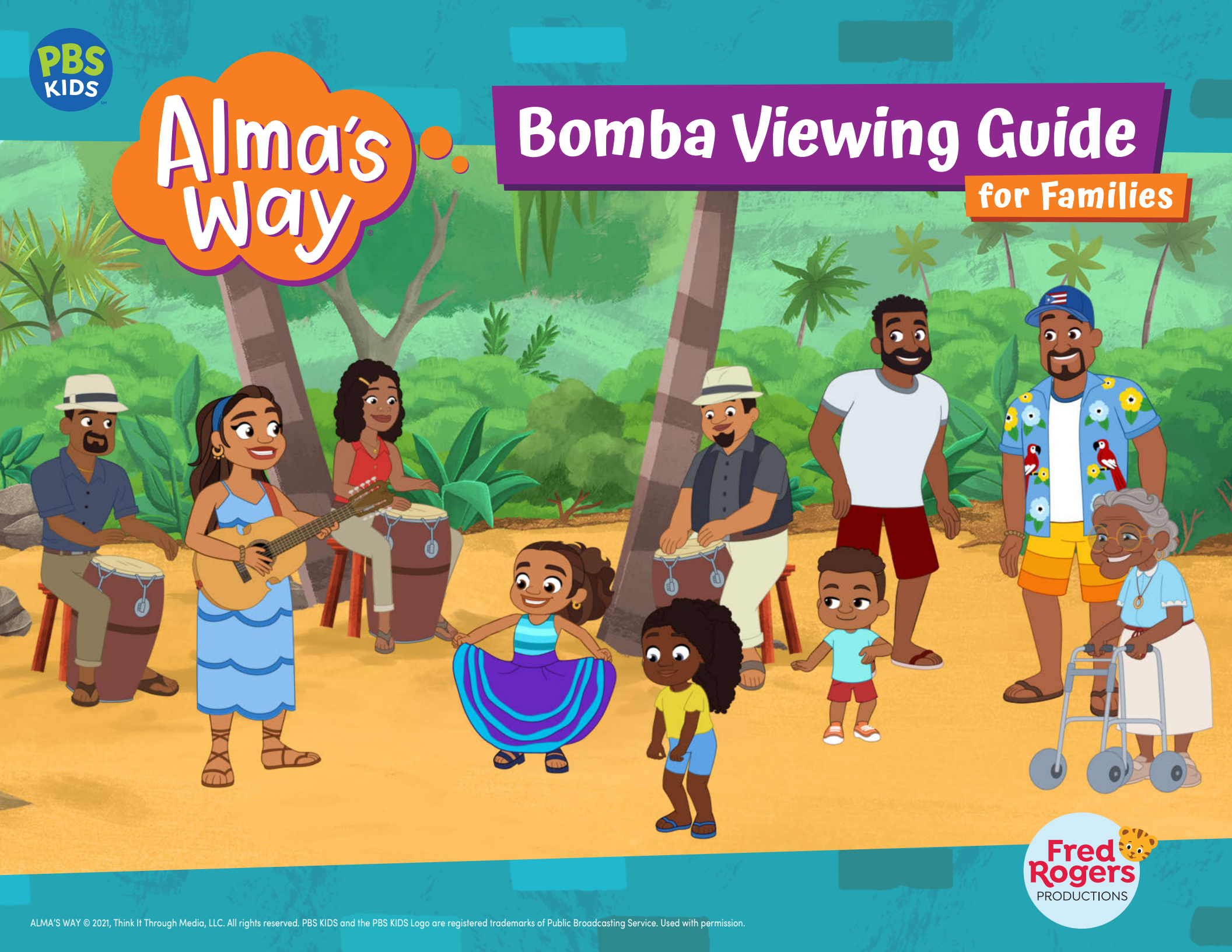




# Alma's Way

## Bomba Viewing Guide

for Families



# Introduction

Alma Rivera is a 6-year-old girl proudly residing in the Bronx. Her family is part of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Her mother, Lulú, was born and raised in New York City, and her father was born and raised in Loíza, Puerto Rico. Through the varied experiences of Alma's relatives, friends, and neighbors, the stories from *Alma's Way* offer insights into some of the many different ways families can retain cultural traditions from their source of origin. Additionally, those experiences are building a shared world that is vibrant and meaningfully reflective of the diversity that makes up Alma's Bronx neighborhood.

For instance, Alma participates in Bomba classes.

See the video on PBS LearningMedia: [“Think It Through: Bomba or Baseball”](#)

And she dances Bomba at a beach in Loíza.

See the movie on YouTube: [“Alma's Way: Alma Goes to Puerto Rico”](#)

In this guide, we'll explore some of Bomba's history and traditional practices.



**Bomba** is a genre of music and dance that has existed for over four centuries and was created by enslaved people brought to the island of Puerto Rico from West Africa.

[Bomba or Baseball: https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/think-it-through-video-almas-way/almas-way-media-gallery/](https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/think-it-through-video-almas-way/almas-way-media-gallery/)

[Alma Goes to Puerto Rico: https://youtu.be/bAGP1b2dQ4k?si=mMnlefKoeC3n0ZMx](https://youtu.be/bAGP1b2dQ4k?si=mMnlefKoeC3n0ZMx)

# Puerto Rican Bomba

## Origin

The first historical record of Bomba in Puerto Rico dates back to the year 1797. The musical genre is a legacy of Puerto Rico's West African heritage—an important part of Puerto Rican cultural identity. Bomba arrived in Puerto Rico through the souls, bodies, and memories of millions of West Africans who had been enslaved during colonization, and were taken to sugar cane plantations to work. Bomba developed as a means of expression and was often used to communicate plans for rebellion and escape and also to celebrate baptisms and marriages. These dances were only permitted on Sundays and during holidays. Bomba spread across the island and developed with special relevance in San Juan, Ponce, Mayagüez, Loíza, and Guayama.

Bomba continues to be practiced and celebrated in Puerto Rico today. In October of 1973, the community of Monte Grande in Piñones, Loíza, hosted the inaugural Festival de Bomba y Plena with the goal of preserving musical genres and traditions. This festival promoted the increase of musical groups and has expanded the contemporary reach of Bomba and Plena, another traditional genre of music in Puerto Rico, all throughout the island. On August 17, 2002, a law was passed declaring the last Saturday of March in Puerto Rico “National Bomba Day” to uplift Bomba’s legacy and cultural value.

### Annual events that celebrate Bomba in Puerto Rico are:

- Puente Cultural de África a Piñones - Loíza
- Fiesta Negra - Arroyo
- Festival Nacional Afrocaribeño - Ponce
- Encuentro de Tambores



Puerto Rican Bomba is a musical genre that helps people connect to who they are as individuals, their families, and their communities. When Bomba is danced, sung, or performed, it helps participants express their feelings, ideas, and beliefs.

## Bomba...

- Relieves tension by allowing you to express yourself and everything you are feeling.
- Provides a sense of belonging. Practicing Bomba with other people can build connection between individuals, and connect them within a larger community.
- Supports the development of leadership skills.
- Creates joy!



The next sections will tell you more about the elements of Bomba, but first watch this video featuring Eva Nicole and Bombazo Dance Co. in the Bronx for a quick introduction to this beautiful cultural dance. See the video on YouTube: ["Alma's Way, My Way—Bomba!"](https://youtu.be/4x4WRBq49Ak?si=3xzowDf8fqXTESKo)

# Elements of Bomba

## Musical Instruments

Within Bomba there are three basic instruments:

1. A pair of **tambores\*** or drums, referred to as *primo* and *buleador*



\* The tambores are also known as *barriles* or *bombas*.

2. One **maraca**



3. And a pair of **cuá**, which are wooden sticks



To see how the dancer, *primo*, and *buleador* work together, refer to the video on YouTube: "[Alma's Way, My Way—Bomba!](https://youtu.be/4x4WRBq49Ak?si=3xzowDf8fqXTESKo)"

The *buleador* drum maintains a consistent rhythm. The *primo* (also known as the *subidor*) marks the improvisations (*golpes* or *piquetes*) of the dancer (*bailador*). This is what makes Bomba unique. Instead of the dancer following the beat of the *primo*, the dancer tells the *primo* what to play by making certain movements! There can be more than one *buleador* playing at the same time, but there can only be one *primo* marking the dancer's *piquetes*.

[My Way—Bomba!: https://youtu.be/4x4WRBq49Ak?si=3xzowDf8fqXTESKo](https://youtu.be/4x4WRBq49Ak?si=3xzowDf8fqXTESKo)

## Dance

The space where Bomba is danced is known as the *batey*\* or *soberao*. While the tambores are playing, a dancer will enter the *batey* and start dancing to the rhythm being played. Then, they will stand in front of the *primo*, and the two will exchange a greeting. This lets the *primo* know which dancer's moves they will follow. The communication between the dancer and drummer is often seen as a friendly challenge, or dialogue. The *primo* must pay careful attention to all of the *bailador's* body movements in order to accurately convey what they are communicating through dance.

Check out some Bomba dance moves in the YouTube video:  
["My Favorite Bomba Move"](#)

\* *Batey* is a word that originated from the Taíno, the Indigenous people of Puerto Rico and some of its neighboring Caribbean islands. *Soberao* is a word of West African origin.

[My Favorite Bomba Move: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/OvYNBqjRDHw](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/OvYNBqjRDHw)



## Music

Like many musical genres that contain subgenres with different sounds and styles, Puerto Rican Bomba is an expansive genre—its rhythms and movements have a great deal of variation. It can be thought of as a family of different rhythms, but the most common are *corvé*, *cuembé*, *güembé*, *holandé*, *seis corrido*, *sicá*, and *yubá*. These regional preferences are important to be aware of because they are connected to the differences in how much control enslaved peoples had over how they moved and what they could do with their own bodies. For instance, in Loíza the rhythms of *corvé* or *rulé* and the *seis corrido* are the most well-known within Bomba *bateyes*. The rhythms used in Loíza are faster and rely on more bodily movements because it is understood that there was less interference and control over dance from enslavers within that region.

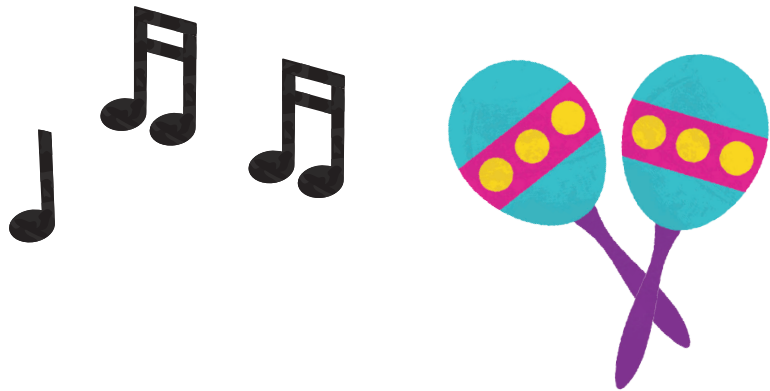
You can hear some of these rhythms in the YouTube video:  
[“My Favorite Bomba Beat”](#)

[My Favorite Bomba Beat: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/9ul7Ncml2CY](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/9ul7Ncml2CY)



## Song

Earlier on in Bomba's history as a genre, women were said to have started the songs, or *cánticos*, with a maraca in hand. Playing the maraca, the singer would announce the rhythm that they wanted the other instruments to follow. The singer is immediately joined by the tambores and the *cuá* to give way to the chorus that will be sung. Then, the story that is told throughout the song unfolds, and the chorus is sung again.



## Clothing

### The Skirt

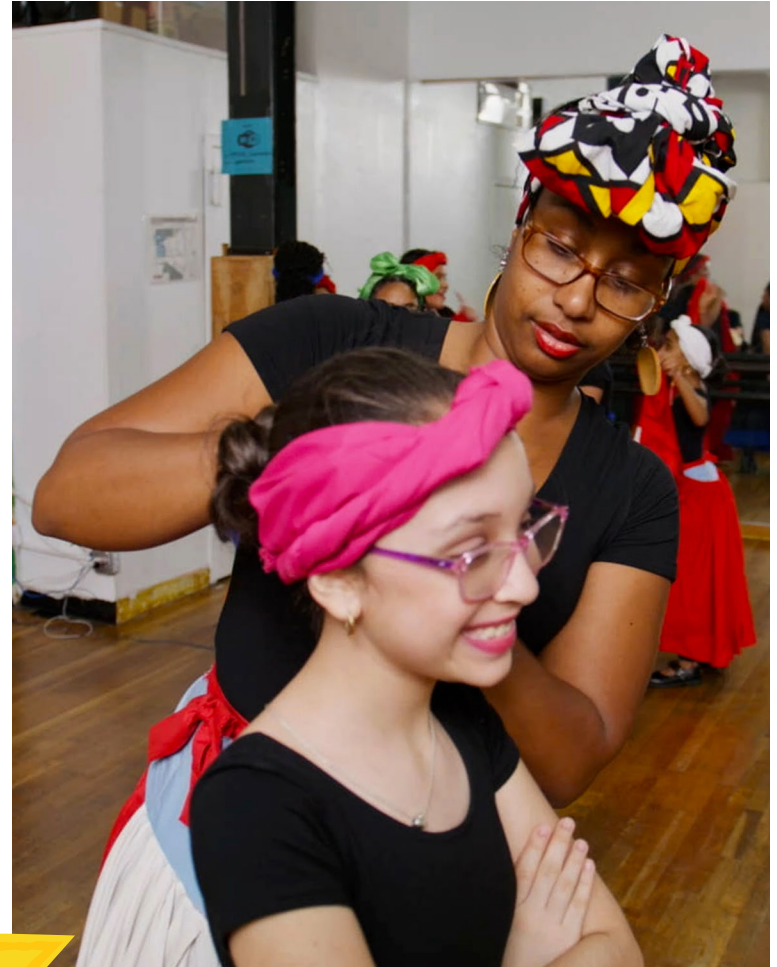
In Puerto Rico there is little historical evidence of the style of dress associated with folkloric Bomba dancers before the twentieth century. It is important to note that enslaved people wore clothes that were assigned to them by enslavers, and this clothing often varied based on their work. For women, clothing choices were limited to dresses and skirts. The use of pants was socially prohibited for women up until 1919, when Luisa Capetillo began wearing them as an act of protest. Prior to this point in Puerto Rico's history, Bomba dancers would have been required to wear skirts or dresses as a result of the societal expectations, and consequences, of the time.

Beginning in the 1950s, many folkloric groups that wanted to preserve Bomba dancing and music were started, and that inspired the use of specific articles of clothing. The use of the skirt, which adds color and dimension to the dance, has great significance within many regions on the island, though it is not required. In Loíza the *golpes* are distinguished more by body movements than by clothing.



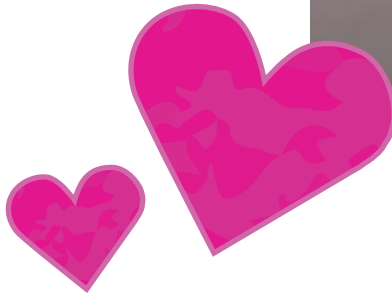
## The Turban

Many cultural groups across the continent of Africa and other parts of the world use variations of the turban and other forms of headwear for various reasons, such as protecting their heads, demonstrating status and religious or spiritual affiliation, among others. This is another element that was introduced to the genre of Bomba in the 1950s. This was influenced by the “Tignon Law” established in 1786 in Louisiana, which required Black women to cover their heads. In response, throughout the twentieth century and even today many people choose to wear similar headwear as a show of pride and empowerment in their identities.



# Talking with Children

When watching "[Alma Goes to Puerto Rico](#)," children might relate to the themes of visiting relatives and intergenerational connection within families. In the beginning of the movie, we see Alma preparing for her trip and making plans for some of the things that she hopes to do while she is in Puerto Rico to celebrate her great-grandmother's 100th birthday. She names Bomba as one of the things that she is most excited to experience on the island. After watching Alma experience some of the elements of Bomba in Puerto Rico in the movie, as well as the video of Eva Nicole demonstrating some of the components of what she and her classmates have been taught, children may be eager to talk about some of the differences and similarities in what they are seeing.



[Alma Goes to Puerto Rico: https://youtu.be/bAGP1b2dQ4k?si=mMnlefKoeC3n0ZMx](https://youtu.be/bAGP1b2dQ4k?si=mMnlefKoeC3n0ZMx)



## Ask Questions

Here are some questions to help guide the conversation:

- ★ What are the parts of Bomba that are shown in the movie? Which one is Alma most excited about?
- ★ What did you think about Alma's skirt? Why do you think Bisabuela Alma gave her the skirt?
- ★ What are the parts of Bomba that we learn from Eva Nicole and her classmates?
- ★ Why do you think Eva Nicole calls her dancing Bomba "my way"?
- ★ There are many different rhythms within Bomba. What are some differences that you notice between the rhythms in the movie and in Eva Nicole's class? What about instruments?
- ★ When Alma and her family arrive in Loíza, they call it the "capital of tradition." How does tradition relate to Bomba? Are there any traditions that you notice Alma and her family practicing in the episode?
- ★ Are there any traditions within our family or community that you were excited to learn about after watching the movie? Are there any traditions within our community that you want to learn about?



## Tell the Stories

Stories that elevate the contributions of Afro-Puerto Ricans are extremely important, as they are often underrepresented. When talking about Bomba with children, it is crucial to be open about its origins. For some, it can feel complicated to talk about the many impacts and legacies of enslavement across the Americas, but it is important to acknowledge Bomba's roots as a testament to the beauty and innovation that was created by enslaved people even in the most dehumanizing conditions. Not addressing this important facet of the history of cultural traditions like Bomba minimizes its importance, especially for those who work to preserve it across generations.

There are many resources devoted to exploring this with children of all ages that can provide a helpful foundation for their continued learning about enslavement. It is important for children to understand that the slave trade brought people from West Africa to the United States, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America.

To learn more about Bomba and other topics covered in this guide, you can check out the resources on the next page.



# Additional Resources

## Online:

To see more Bomba dancing in action check out:

YouTube Channel: [Corporación Piñones se Integra COPI](#)

Facebook: [Corporación Piñones se Integra - COPI | Loíza](#)

## Books:

*Born on the Water*, Nikole Hannah-Jones – an English-language illustrated book about the enslavement of Africans in America

*Bomba Puertorriqueña!*, Milteri Tucker – English and Spanish bilingual illustrated children's book about the legacy of Bomba in Puerto Rico

*Cancionero Ilustrado: Bomba de Loíza*, Marcos A. Peñaloza Pica & Maricruz Rivera Clemente – a Spanish-language illustrated book of Bomba songs from Loíza, Puerto Rico

## Music Album:

*Ritmo Bambula*, Raúl Berrios – Spanish-language Bomba music

YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@corporacionpinonesseintegr6433>

Facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/CorporacionPinonesseIntegra/?locale=es\\_LA](https://www.facebook.com/CorporacionPinonesseIntegra/?locale=es_LA)

## Credits:

### Escuelas de Bomba Puertorriqueña

This guide was written in collaboration with Corporación Piñones se Integra based in Loíza.

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### Perception Institute

[perception.org](http://perception.org)

