

J'ouvert Speaks to the Present:

A Kinesthetic Journey through Moments in African-Caribbean History

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Introduction

“Your lost sons send you greetings, Mother Africa. From the West Indies, to Bermuda and Bermuda to the United States they sigh after you” (Sherlock, 1963, 749). According to Sloat (2002), the world is moving to Caribbean beats: “Rhythms derived from Africa returned [to her] and [become] newly Africanized rumbas and reggaes” (vii). Many choreographers have been known to incorporate the hip sway known as whinin’ and other indigenous Caribbean dance forms to add a bit of sensuality to their work. Despite the widespread popularity of these dance forms, which are mostly folk, social and ritualized in nature, very little is known about the complex culture from which these dances emerged. According to Hall (2003), “Colonization is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content...it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.” (235). Therefore, the cultural identity of the Caribbean like other diasporic cultures became products of forced migration. The cultural dances are the direct result of Europe’s colonization of the Caribbean and the influence brought over by the enslaved Africans and East Indians. The marriage of cultures produced many blended dances on these islands. While these dances represent some form of identity, belonging and

national history one can hardly explore the dances without first addressing how they came to be and the unfortunate commodification of African slave history in the Caribbean.

J'ouvert is one such event that is rich with dances that evolved out of the slave experience in the Caribbean. This paper will focus on the experiences of J'ouvert and the dances that emerged in Trinidad and Tobago with some comparative references to other Caribbean islands.

Effects of Colonization on Caribbean Cultural Identity

European colonization of the Caribbean has disrupted the ancestral connections of an entire people and therefore makes an event like J'ouvert vital in rediscovering that connection. Slavery and colonization have robbed people of the African diaspora of their cultural identification and forced them to cling to newly formed nation states that hardly represent or truly allow for an African –centered nationalism; many of the Caribbean countries are still heavily influenced by British rule. By discussing the historical journey to J'ouvert and identifying some of the traditional masques and Caribbean dances that emerged from the processional street theater, the celebration of J'ouvert can be used as a tool to kinesthetically re-educate descendants of the African diaspora and educate 'other' students against the myths and inconsistent stories often told about African people. "Despite a common history of slavery that led to people of African descent being separated from one another by distance and space, they are still joined by a common goal...African people are still involved in a concerted struggle to gain total freedom and equality for themselves and the continent which they are associated"(Jackson & Cothran, 2003, 579).

This struggle and the effects of colonization caused two challenges for Caribbean people. First, they had to accept that being Caribbean means being part of a “Transnational Family.” Second, their cultural identification, which links them to the nation, has been superimposed by an external force. Therefore, Caribbean people and arguably all people of African descent continue to be a people of lost heritage. The nation state becomes their only form of belonging even when it cannot represent all aspects of African culture. “Rootedness is therefore mandatory if one is to come to terms with the histories, epistemologies and attitudes engineered to make one feel a stranger in one’s own home” (Rahim, 2006, 9).

To be Caribbean and part of a Transnational Family is to be of mixed heritage African, European, and Indian. According to Rahim (2006), each Caribbean nation remains a legitimate space and context for identification without severing its connection to a wider concept of home. She also states that “there is no doubt that ... Caribbean thematic and aesthetic practices rest solidly on the fact that Caribbeanness embraces both the nation within and beyond borders” (5). She accurately captures the realities of Caribbean identification to the nation state while addressing the deep rooted problems in having to maintain such connections as being a direct cause of European imperialism. “European imperialism left in its wake a long trail of abuses in the name of a civilizing agenda, bent on homogenizing the human race in accordance with its ethnocentric and nationalist terms. Perhaps there is a real case for abandoning them” (Rahim, 2006, 18).

Colonization has had some perceptually damaging effects on the Caribbean. The people of these areas only know themselves in relation to what emancipation from

slavery afforded them and lost all knowledge of their previous selves. “The nation then is the legitimate space from which its inhabitants learn about themselves, and so speak about themselves to themselves and to the world” (Rahim, 2006, 8). Without a healthy perception of self, I argue that it will be difficult for the nations of the Caribbean to ever truly celebrate J’ouvert with its rich African traditions since European influence is still heavily visible in most of its nations. Some nations in the Caribbean are still struggling to separate themselves from the oppressive British rule more than a century after emancipation.

Second, there is cause for concern when who you are hinges largely on what you remember or were told about your history; the author of the story becomes inherently important to your identification. Caribbean people as descendants of the African diaspora must know the truth of about all that encompasses their cultural identity. The survival and preservation of their total cultural identity depends on all aspects being remembered and perpetuated not just the portions that are readily available by the current or dominant culture. The collection and maintenance of this identity will have to be an ongoing process of re-memorization of events, aesthetics, meanings and purpose passed on through physical and verbal recollections to future generations. “Most African, African American and West Indian parents were said to pass a sense of history to their children through oral tradition, including stories, legend, oral history, games, and family events” (Jackson & Cothran, 2003, 599). In a study of how African, African American and West Indian parents pass a sense of history on to their children the statistics revealed the following:

Based on a total of 427 people surveyed in each group:

Method of Receiving Information	Africans	African Americans	West Indians
Oral Traditions (stories, legends, Written/unwritten history, family events, games and pictures)	400 = 93.6%	382 = 89.6%	394 = 92.3 %
Lacked information	23 = 5.4%	31 = 7.2%	30 = 7%
School	4 = 1%	14 = 3.3%	3 = .7%

(Information adapted from study done by Jackson & Cothran, 2003, 592)

From this chart I conclude that the school system and standard education is failing to educate students in their cultural languages. A large part of what is learned and remembered is passed on through oral tradition. Without written documentation of this history and as the elders die and the truth of the story is not passed on much of what is African will be lost. According to M.K. Asante, an Afrocentric education is necessary to correct the negative effects and distorted image of Africans, inherited by the Eurocentric educational system (Jackson & Cothran, 2003, 581).

The celebration of J'ouvert – as taught through its authentic oral and kinesthetic foundations – has extraordinary potential to educate and re-educate persons about the journey of the enslaved Africans to the Caribbean. J'ouvert, through its night time revelry, captures the essence of the struggles of slavery in the Caribbean while maintaining relevance and its voice against present day injustices. Deep in masquerade themes, kinesthetically played out in dance and movement, students can discover a

history that is profoundly relevant to all people. “I saw dancers reinventing their fragmented histories... who was it that dared to enchain us? Who was it that took away our gifts and our cultures?” (Alleyne-Dettmers, 2002, 263).

Children who participate in J’ouvert are offered an opportunity to kinesthetically reconstruct their ancestral past while forging their own relationship with their heritage and a sense of identity manifested through the dance. In its processional street theatre, J’ouvert speaks to the present audiences from its ancestral voices warning us to hold tight to our identities. It reminds us that centuries of colonialism may have oppressed us and robbed us of our leaders but we must remember and continue to tell the stories any way we can. “Bob Marley, pioneer of Jamaican reggae music, puts it very well in his Redemption Song: “Emancipate yourself from the mental slavery, none but yourselves can free your minds” (Jackson & Cothran, 2003, 597). This means it is up to the people of the African diaspora to reclaim their freedom and culture and to disavow any attempts of the “oppressor” to silence theirs or the voices of their ancestors through them.

J’ouvert is one specific event in Caribbean history that highlights many Africanized Caribbean dance forms. J’ouvert (pronounced jou-vay) is a Creole corruption of the French words *Jour ouvert* which means “day” “open”. One part of a multi-event, week-long celebration of life and culture called Carnival, it typically begins between 2am – 4am and continues until sunrise just before the daytime parade. Participants celebrate the resistance to cultural domination and triumph over enslavement. In Trinidad the massive, night-time processional street party occurs on the Monday night before the Lenten season begins. In other countries it can be on August 1st (Emancipation Day), and yet for other West Indian countries it is simply the night

before the daytime “Pretty Mas” parade. Pretty Mas, a bright and festive version of the celebration, features colorful feathers and beaded costumes and is more popular and commercially publicized. J’ouvert values the transgressive dirt while Pretty Mas celebrates the transcendent glitter. J’ouvert is for the people and Pretty Mas is for the establishment.

J’ouvert was an opportunity for the ex-slaves to reclaim their freedom, culture, and legal right to celebrate this freedom any way they chose. Twining (1985), postulates that there is a connection of movement and dance to African folk life and describes it culturally as a suitable vehicle for expression for all mood and emotions (p. 463). “Rhythmic movement and dance are integrated into the whole life pattern of the people, becoming part and parcel of their communication with each other” (Twining, 1985, 464). Unfortunately, the hegemonic ideology of the European ruling class would not allow such defiance to go unchallenged and therefore the traditions of J’ouvert struggle to resist extinction.

Elements and Aesthetics of Caribbean Dance

“For a long time, if the dancers’ costumes in some Caribbean dance choreographers’ work were removed and if the Caribbean music was silenced, we would in many instances find no Caribbean links. It would not be clear from the movement structure alone...But thank god, there are signs that things are changing” (Stines, 2005, 45).

Beauty is not the only thing the eye beholds. Those eyes also hold meaning, validation and belonging. The power and conviction sometimes found in Caribbean

dance offers an aesthetic that differs from western cultures. In exploring Caribbean dance, through the form's own lens, one is afforded the opportunity to experience the value systems of diverse cultures within its cultural context, explore the beauty in movement of the African continent and connect with history in a more authentic way. "Culture is expressed [best] through the body" (Ward, 2013, 31).

Much has been "borrowed" from Caribbean dance, folk, and African diasporic dances, but very little has been given back to these cultures for the rich information and cultural jewels that were appropriated. This has been done to the extent that lines have been severely blurred as to where African-Caribbean diasporic dances end and new dances begin. More research is necessary to help restore the histories of these movements and the purposes of their stories. There is a line from a popular reggae song that says "Tomorrow people where is your past?" This question has never been more relevant than today when dance has become a kaleidoscope of merged movement.

Snakelike, percussive, fluid, strong, loud, soft, sensual, sharp, polycentric, rhythmic, rippling, earthy, grounded, weighted, undulating, supple and pelvic.

These are just a few words that may be used to describe the qualities present in Caribbean dance. Strong calves resist marching and shuffling while strong knees and thighs support a torso rippling horizontally. Without technical terms to codify Caribbean movement or the movement of that region, those unfamiliar with these traditions may not know where or how to look. They may apply their own aesthetic framework to try to understand, while missing the story and purpose essential to understanding.

Dances are described by their native names which came out of specific rituals. The movement represents the experiences of the people and their relationship to the earth. The way the body moves in Caribbean dance strongly represents the movement of nature. "Arms flow like rivers and torsos undulate like the outlines of rolling hills or the ebb-flow of the surrounding sea" (Nettleford, 2002, 88).

Several key elements typify all African and African based dances. Taken individually each element or aesthetic holds a different level of significance to the culture and the movement:

Polyrhythmic refers to the ability to comprehend and move to multiple sometimes competing rhythms. "The multiple rhythms allow continuity of movement." (Ward, 2013, 32) The idea of continuity is a very important aspect of African culture especially in the transition from the physical to the spirit realms. The feet may maintain one rhythm while the torso, legs, arms dance to the beat of different rhythms.

Polycentric refers to the ability for movement to originate from multiple zones in the body simultaneously. "From the Africanist perspective, movement may originate from any body zone, and two or more areas of the body may simultaneously serve as centers of movement" (Gottschild, 2002, 5). In African culture the world is evolving and multiple forces are always at work simultaneously.

Body isolation: articulating one body part at a time. Some cultures highlight or emphasize use of certain body parts more than others. In Trinidad and many other Caribbean countries children learn at a very young age how to isolate their hips in order to whine.

Groundedness, the bending forward in both the knee and the torso, demonstrates a connection with the earth and the ancestors. Earth centered, this movement is the beginning of life. It is a way of celebrating life itself.

Call and Response reflects the participatory and communal nature of African based dances.

Circle Formations represents the continuity of life and protection of the community. The circle can be formed by performing dancers or onlookers. The circle in diasporic dances maintains the constant exchange of energy both from performers to onlookers and back. Onlookers could simultaneously switch roles and become performers. Often times this exchange is seen as chaotic and

disorganized by those who see linear structures of audience/performer relationships as superior. “The circle stands in contrast to the fourth wall proscenium stage of European performance that emerged from the medieval Christian mass and continues today in the tradition of the concert stage” (Gottschild, 2002, 9).

Improvisation: a willingness to share individual style and engage in playful competition.

These aesthetic elements and qualities of movement emphasize emotional and cultural bonds that encourage dancers to interact with their African heritage.

To understand the cultural trends and aesthetic movement qualities that have developed in the countries of the Caribbean, we must first look at the population structure. “The Portuguese arrived in Congo in 1483 and soon began exporting slaves... According to one recent historian three million enslaved people from the Congo/Angola region were sent to the Americas out of an estimated total of thirteen million enslaved people shipped from Africa. They were an important part of the population on many Caribbean islands” (Crowell, 2002, 18). Much of Caribbean culture represents direct links to the Congo and elsewhere on the African continent. The people, the music even the dances are all representative of the homelands of the Bakongo people, Angola, the republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the former Zaire.

There is no doubt that the slave trade became the vehicle through which these dances and the music from the Congo and elsewhere contributed to the development of the music and dances we now know in the Caribbean. Describing movement derivatives of the Congo, Crowell writes, “isolations of the ball and heel of your foot that figure in toe heel in Jamaica and meringue in Haiti, touching the ground with just the ball of your foot or just the heel are the same as those used in dances in the Congo. And winin’ to Trinidad’s soca and Jamaica’s dance hall, the way dancers mobilize their hips quickly

brings to mind the hip rolling and hip swinging that distinguish Congolese dance”
(Crowell, 2002, 12).

Inherent in the cultural understanding of this movement is also the fact that it is purpose-based. All African-Caribbean based movement results from experiences with the spirit world and in contemporary times with the oppressor. “Dancehall, on the other hand, is a livy in which the marginalized people of the so called ghettos of Jamaica shout for political and social attention, control of their own space, visibility and acceptance of their presence, improved living conditions and elevated lifestyles. Through their kinetic revolt, dancehall gave birth to a new...energy informed by ritualistic embodied memories” (Stines, 2005, 45). “Caribbean Dance begins from a spiritual space, the ancestral groundation of the blood sweat and tears of the millions of Africans deposited on the shores with a dash of China, India, and Europe. The vibration of swirling hips, the convulsing spinal column, the swaying arms, the juxtaposition in the uses of the space, the contrapuntal rhythms of Africa, feet firmly rooted in the earth, intimately and spiritually connecting wo/man with drums, wo/man with ancestors, wo/man with man, wo/man with woman and wo/man with Gods” (Stines, 2005, 35). Caribbean dance becomes the voice of the past, present and future in one swaying arm, one undulating back and one rolling waist all descending towards the earth and rising back up towards the heavens. Each movement becomes a reflection on the historical deposits of our ancestors with the body used as a conduit for the continued communication of that experiential information.

Caribbean dance becomes embodied cultural and historical information for the people of the African diaspora evidenced in the body through movement. The few written accounts of the origins of this style of movement, continue to overlook and discount its true essence and significance. "To many of the missionaries the dances of the Africans were "licentious," "lustful," "indecent," and "provocative." Campaigns to outlaw and prohibit certain dances were common and often pursued with evangelical zeal" (Welsh-Asante, 1985, 384). According to Gerstin (2010), "White colonials created an image of black identity that embodied both their own forbidden desires and their fears" (20). It seems anytime Europeans encountered African dancing the behavior they saw was described as indecent and uncivilized. Why did the sensuality of moving the pelvis make them so uncomfortable? Movement in this way was not only cultural but also functioned as a tool of preservation to the culture. "The hip vibrating, waist-shaking movements of the women that ended with an accent on the pelvis were sensual and beautiful distractions for the enemy" (Welsh-Asante, 1985, 384). African-Caribbean dance *always* has a purpose.

The African-Caribbean movement of whinin' is described as rolling the waist in circular motions. You can roll clockwise, counter-clockwise or "tick" which is to hit the corners of the waist roll instead of creating smooth circles. The timing is similar to the second hand on a clock, hence the name. These various waist rolls can be slow, fast, or multi-tempo. Additionally, all of this can happen while the rest of the body is extremely quiet or immobile. "How can a practitioner's face remain calm and mask-like as her body jerks and veers in a dance that seems to come from a force beyond her physical control?" (Gottschild, 2002, 6). Whinin' requires a good sense of body isolation and bent

knees. These are the body isolations and complete muscular control that continue to mystify many of European descent or those trained in a European aesthetic who attempt to embody this African-Caribbean aesthetic.

The common thread between all dances of the Caribbean is the element of play, competition and communal feelings with either the drum or moving with other dancers. Typically, Caribbean dances are done by men and women dancing in pairs. Other times, women may dance with other women in seemingly provocative ways. There is a constant competition between dance partners. This quality is very evident and common to Congolese dance. The Congo/Angola area is also famous for its pelvic thrust movements which West Indians term “the Juk.” This occurs when the dancer thrusts the pelvic area forward forcefully, almost like a quick stabbing motion in the air. “On every island, people are accustomed to periodic social gatherings ... The common dance from that has been produced involves couple dancing, women and men with lots of hip or pelvic action, whether hip circling as in the “whine” in Trinidad and Jamaica, or meringue in Haiti, or merengue in Dominican Republic or hip swinging as in mazouk on Martinique or Rumba in Cuba” (Daniel, 2002, 23). From these few descriptions of Caribbean dance we can begin to paint a more universal picture of movement representative of this area, regardless of the different names from country to country.

Origins of Caribbean Carnival

Historically, Carnival started as a masquerade ball by slave owners in Trinidad and Tobago. These slave owners would put on fancy wigs, masks and the clothing of royalty and dance and parade long into the night. “Spain also invited French Caribbean planters with their slaves to settle in lightly populated Trinidad in the late 18th century,

leaving an indelible effect on its culture, including its famous pre-Lenten Carnival” (Gerstin, 2010, 30). “The colonial French (and subsequently British) Carnival was, for the most part, ‘a high-society affair of elaborate balls, masking and costuming, street parading in carriages, and house-to-house visiting, lasting from Christmas to Shrove Tuesday’ ” (Harris, 1998, 109).

Since enslaved Africans were not permitted to congregate and practice their traditional rituals, waiting for the Pre-Lenten season afforded their rituals the opportunity of the “mask” of the season. “Living in a society in which masking and disguise were often prohibited except on Carnival Monday and Tuesday pre-empted this season for their own culture-affirming, European-resisting celebrations. Such celebrations would then have been “disguised” in two senses: the revellers wore “disguises,” in good Carnival style, but they also “disguised” or “masked” their own celebrations, hiding from the elites of the island the nature of the revelry” (Riggio, 1998, 12). The enslaved were also forbidden to walk the streets therefore they were limited to their backyards. Seeing these “primitive” backyard celebrations prompted the French to mimic the enslaved.

The enslaved Africans came from a variety of nations. The Africans came from ethnic groups such as Igbos, Mandingoes, Yorubas, Hausas, Asantes, and Kongos to name a few. They brought with them dances such as Bamboula, Ghouba, Kalinda and Belair (which the French changed from the African spelling of Bele’). “In the Caribbean, the derivation of words becomes a political issue, as people battle over the African and European sides of their heritage...Does bele descend from Kongoboela, a dance or from French bel air, “pretty tune” (Gerstin, 2010, 27). This question remains

unanswered and therefore you may hear Trinidadians using both spellings interchangeably.

The enslaved Africans often mimicked and mocked the actions and behaviors of their masters hence the term "Playing Mas". The sentiment was one of "I'm copying you copy me". These enslaved Africans would always overlay their mimicry with African drumming and singing, demonstrating to their European owners that their legacy would be to acknowledge that they have two options: accept what is imposed on them without contest or resist it in the form of jovial street theater. The smiles they wore carried multiple meaning. They were smiles of perceived submission and smiles of determined escape.

The festival has come to embrace all the influences that were indigenous to the island. It was inevitable that a marriage between the customs (African and European) would occur. The French appropriated ritualistic behaviors of their slaves into their masquerade balls and street processional parties. In turn, the African slaves used the masque of Carnival to not just mask their revelry, but to masque the true purpose of preserving their culture.

History of J'ouvert

To use James Scott's phrase, the "hidden transcript" was to preserve elements of African cultures of origin on the part of a displaced people and in the process to play out forms of resistance to and transgression against the "masters" of the plantocracy (Riggio, 1998, 12).

J'ouvert holds historical importance to the culture of the enslaved Africans of the Caribbean. The celebration marks the emancipation from slavery for Africans. After the

emancipation of slaves in Trinidad on August 1, 1838, Carnival and in turn J'ouvert, became a symbol of freedom and defiance. J'ouvert, was actually born out of another historical event in Trinidadian history called Cannes Brulees or canes burning. During their period of enslavement negres jardins (field negroes) were sent to put out fires on the sugar cane plantations in the middle of the night. The slaves of surrounding plantations were marched to the fire ravished areas. Horns and shells were blown to call them to action. "The gangs were followed by the drivers cracking their whips and urging them with cries and blows to their work" (Pearse, 1956, 183). After 1838, the freed Africans would re-enact the event every year on August 1st in memory of their new positions in life and a ritual developed. The celebration included harvesting and burning of sugar canes known as "Cannes Brulees". It became their way of laughing at their masters' loss of sugar cane crops. Canboulay, which was created by the emancipated Africans, was their version of a more Afro-centric festival that literally and metaphorically invaded the space once occupied by the French Masqueraders.

"The Africans [were] projecting...their aspiration for true liberty, freedom to pursue their own goals as human beings and not to be hampered in this effort by the White planter class or the European colonial rulership which regarded them as inferior or even savage and without civilisation. This is the burden of the message of Cannes Brulees" (Elder, 1998, 38).

The emancipation of the enslaved Africans allowed for other ritualistic practices to take form during Cannes Brulees or Canboulay as the name was later changed to.

"Carnival has indeed died out, owing to the loss of interest in it by the better classes, but "the name and season is but a cloak for the shameless celebration of

heathenish and vicious rites of some profligate god whose votaries rival in excesses the profligacies and brutalities of Pagan Rome or Heathen India". (Pearse, 1956, 189). It became clear that when the so called better classes of people were no longer interested in this affair denigration resulted. Europeans began their campaign to mark this event as a form of public nuisance and labeled it barbaric. Their inability to understand the Africans desire to connect spiritually with their culture since being displaced caused the European elite to see a very different picture. What they characterized as vulgar and inappropriate was the Africans' attempt to preserve their traditions while connecting with the earth and their deities.

The racist and antagonistic commentary that classified the Canboulay version of Carnival began to receive the unwarranted and negative attention of the British Crown. "By the 1850s, Trinidad's British colonial authorities regarded the Canboulay Carnival as raising dangerous tensions in the society. They attempted to ban and then to control the festival. The transformed Caribbean Carnival was eventually forced to restrict Canboulay to the early darkness at the beginning of the Carnival."(La Rose, 2004, 3). Although the African Trinidadians agreed to these terms to avoid conflict, "it seems to have been widely believed that the police action of 1880 was a step towards the suppression of Canboulay and Carnival" (Pearse, 1956, 189). In retaliation to the Crown and the military, the people planned an organized resistance. "A band of negroes 3,000-4,000 strong passing the police station, armed with hatchets, woodmen's axes, cutlasses, bludgeons and knives . . . had the bold temerity to give a derisive shout of triumphant defiance to the police" (Pearse, 1956, 188). "This was the physical battle to keep Carnival on the streets, to play mas in their cultural and artistic tradition. The

Jamette's stones, stick fighters and guerrilla warfare in the narrow streets of Port-of-Spain routed Captain Baker and his police." (La Rose, 2004, 2).

Although the slaves were emancipated from their physical bondage, the European elite persisted to abject them from true freedom by limiting their cultural expression. This became a form of cultural bondage. The Canboulay Riots of 1881 became a loud and resounding 'NO' to this cultural domination. The Riots of 1881, which were populated mostly by Jamettes, as they were referred to natively, derived from the French word Diametre; "which means the people that fall below the diameter of respectability or underclass" (Liverpool, 1998, 27). Despite the colonial administrations attempts at banning Canboulay the people and their traditions prevailed. Unfortunately it was reduced to one day. The festival finally found a home on the Monday night before Lent which is when it became known as J'ouvert. In this way Canboulay remains a ritualized burning of cannes and J'ouvert becomes the enacted street theatre through song and dance of all the trials and injustices of slavery. In effect, the celebration of J'ouvert became the celebration of Emancipation Day. An important fact of J'ouvert is that there aren't any spectators, only participants. J'ouvert emphasizes the solidarity of the people.

Masque Dances of J'ouvert

"It is in Emancipation then that we find the genesis of the Jouvay Carnival characters. Along with parody, ridicule, and pappyshow... All of these masquerades present themselves not only in costume but through their own peculiar song, dance, and/or speech" (Lovelace, 1998, 55). "The word "masque" indicates that the band wears costumes based on a theme from history, current events, films, Carnival tradition,

from the imagination, or from a combination of these. It is thus differentiated from “mask”, the covering of the face and/or head sometimes worn by the masquers” (Crowley, 1956, 194). They included the Jab Posse or Jab Molasse, blue devils, bats, midnight robbers, Dame Lorraines, and pis-en-lit, Moko Jumbies, Minstrels and Burroquites. Barbara Enrenreich (February 2009) wrote “Blue Devils mockingly beating people was symbolic of the old slavery concept of ‘work-them-til-they die in early Trinidad. The mimed hostility of the devil echoes the historical rage of the past.’”

Despite its many adaptations, many of the islands celebrating J’ouvert maintained some of J’ouvert’s historic dances and original characters or masques. J’ouvert’s processional street theatre has taken on many characters and themes over the years. This paper will only focus on a select few. Specifically, the ones that are less fancy, closet to the original story of J’ouvert and have become rare and extinct like the Negre Jardin and Batonnier, the Jamette bands, the Moko Jumbie, and the Jab Molassie. Each of these characters continues to tell the story of J’ouvert in significant ways. Their masques are the one that will carry the tradition of J’ouvert.

The Negre Jardin

This masque is the most ancient of all since it comes directly out of the Canboulay celebrations. “ As early as 1860 the neg jade was so much a traditional carnival masque that the Trinidad Sentinel describes how...princes and Lords of the land paraded in sooty disguise of the negre jardin and how even residents of the Government House mimicked their “garden niggers””(Crowley, 1956, 194). The stick-fighters of Kalenda who were also called Batonye later became the keepers of this masque. Five to twenty men would form a band and moved about the streets

accompanied by drummers or bamboo bands challenging and fighting rival bands.

While in stick-fighting mode two men enter a circle of onlookers, most likely the members of both bands. These two men advance and then jump back away from each other taunting each other with the threat of a “lash” of the stick. The stance is one of a sideways, bent knee profile with the stick in hand and the arm elbow elevated slightly across the chest and face for protection against a hit. The two men dance around each other shuffling the feet but only leaving the challenge stance to forge forward in an attack.

During the attack they hit sticks violently attempting to “bushhead” or draw blood from their opponent. All while this “dance” occurs in the circle onlookers sing songs while the drummers keep the momentum of the attack constant with the beat of the drum. This dance is competitive and playful in nature, the dancers are grounded, it uses the circle, and uses jumping and polyrhythmic movement of the feet. It is a demonstration of the fighting spirit of the African-Caribbean. Since the hampering of stick-fighting in recent years by police restrictions, Kalenda dances are only performed by the Batonye in country villages and have re-invented itself in “an intricate dance using a stretched handkerchief in place of a stick” (Crowley, 1956, 195).

The Jamette Bands

The Jamette masque was another traditional masque that was suppressed because of its perceived obscenity. Historically, the Jamette were the people belonging to the underworld or less respectable. These were people that took up arms against the

colonial police and administration when they attempted to purify the Africanized carnival celebrations of their culture. First the drums were taken, then the sticks. The Jamette Bands gathered large numbers of people to display power in numbers. Their dance and story through movement was anything that was perceived as an affront to the respectable society. Movements ranged from lewd to the carrying of cutlasses, machetes, poui sticks, pots and pans. These were weapons of war. This was a challenge dance in which masqueraders challenged, the onlookers emulating the aggression toward the colonial administration in old times. They whined waist, chipped, and charged en mass.

The Moko Jumbie

The Moko Jumbie is the stilt dancer of the West Indies brought over by the enslaved Africans. As mentioned earlier, many cultural traditions of Caribbean dance derived from what was preserved from the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The Moko Jumbie can be traced back to the Mandinka and the Igbos of Nigeria. It was once called the Jumbie of the Moko, a now defunct designation referring to the Efik/Ibibio ethnic group of Nigeria's Cross River Area. According to McNaughton (1982), The Mande people who occupy a broad swath of territory in the upper Guinea region, "perceive the bush as a place of 'dibi' and the world of sorcery is submerged in it" (p. 58). Maqueraders are described as dibifinw (things of dibi) that enter the world of obscurity to fight treachery and sorcery.

The Moko Jumbies on their high 10-15 foot stilts were said to see high above the trees and were the protectors of the people. "In Senegal when villagers dance, they stamp their feet to keep away the evil spirits. These spirits would take refuge in the

trees where only the Moko Jumbie, stilt dancers, could reach them to get rid of them. In the Eastern Caribbean the dance of the Moko Jumbie may look very clumsy and unstable; that is only a façade. These Jumbies would stamp feet and crack whips or wave wands to disperse ghosts and the very advanced Jumbie could jump, whin' and dance on one leg. According to Alleyne-Dettmers (2002), the dance begins as a type of call and response of the Moko Jumbie with the music...with torso inclined forward, bent knees and flat-footed shuffles known as chippin', and waist rolling, jumping, kicking and pivots the dancers move. The acrobatic nature she describes challenges Crowley's and the description of many others of it looking similar to a jig. "His dance was similar to a jig, and he either used the music of any passing band or was accompanied by a drum, triangle, and flute" (Crowley, 1956, 196).

The Moko Jumbie dance like other masque dances is a spirit dance. "Trinidadians speak of the "Spirit of Carnival" which entails being possessed by the spirit of the mas that is, taking on the actual spirit of the persona embodied by the costume". (Alleyne-Dettmers, 2002, 272). The Moko Jumbie dance, because of its height and spirit nature, is said to escape from the gravitational forces of earth. It symbolizes man's power to thwart the evil traps that are constantly being set for him. Unfortunately like so many other traditional J'ouvert masques this one too has become virtually extinct. Initially, the extinction of this masque was due to the danger of passing under high voltage electrical wires about the city. Another obstacle became the difficulty and skill required to master this stilt dancing art. Few master stilt dancers still teach this art form to Caribbean youth and so the masque is at risk of dying completely. However, Moko Jumbies continue to thrive in the US Virgin Islands. The Ricardo Richards Elementary

School, USVI serves as a Moko Jumbie Academy training a new set of young performers to keep this centuries old tradition.

The Jab Molasie

The Jab Molasie Masque or Molasses Devil received its name from the fact that enslaved Africans were forced to harvest the sugar from the plantations but were never paid for their hard work. Therefore the Jab Molasie, cover themselves with molasses and parade down the street.

Conclusion

The fragmented ties Caribbean people may have with their African ancestry can be laid at the feet of European colonization. Therefore, where ever J'ouvert is celebrated, we see that it is born out of a social and political unrest for basic human rights. Unfortunately much of J'ouvert's historical story gets scattered and diluted in the encompassing celebration of Carnival. Failing to articulate the specific importance of each Carnival event causes the story behind the tradition to become vague with conflicting accounts. "Historical material on early Caribbean dance and music is scattered, sketchy, and contradictory" (Gerstin, 2010, 11). As indicated earlier, much of what people of African descent know about themselves is passed on through oral tradition and movement. Time must be invested in telling all the stories to keep them authentic and potent. "Caribbean people today remain greatly interested in researching their roots" (Gerstin, 2010, 11); therefore my literary journey through J'ouvert becomes even more relevant.

“Histories of musical practices and of dance in Africa and the Caribbean are very incomplete. Somewhere along the line, adaptations were made” (Gerstin, 2010, 33). Dances evolved. Much of what we see as different or conflicting accounts can be attributed to the fact that slave history was not homogeneous; therefore neither will the resulting contributions be. “Overlaps between these dances indicate the importance of cultural ties between former French colonies” (Gerstin, 2010, 19).

The degree to which French colonials were transporting Congolese slaves to various islands in the Caribbean can account for why there are differences in the styles of the dances. Being immersed in a new way of life will definitely have varying cultural impacts. The continued infiltration of Congo/Angolans even after the slave trade ended also reinforced the Central African influence on these islands and therefore the dances.

Tucked away in the rhythmic movements of these dances are the secrets to African-Caribbean slave history. The best way to uncover that history and teach it to future generations is through kinesthetic approaches. By discussing its historical journey and identifying some of the traditional masques and Caribbean dances that emerged, J’ouvert can be used to re-educate descendants of the African diaspora and educate ‘other’ students against the myths and inconsistent stories often told about African people. This journey will require individuals to become fully engaged bodies and minds as they practically and critically analyze and integrate ideas and make meaning of the world around them – particularly the world they were forced to forget.

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