

## **Dance and Postcolonial Nationalism – Embodying Emancipation**

---

### **Towards a Creolist Aesthetic – African Caribbean Identity and Dance**

[...] post-colonial societies must accomplish two things if they are to re-establish self-confidence and re-embark upon the process of self-discovery that is expressed by the evolution of a people's culture. They must rediscover the validity of their own culture at the moment of the colonial intervention and retrace the steps that had led through history to that point. And they must establish within a frame of reality of the culture which colonialism imposed upon them so that this may loom neither larger nor smaller than it deserves and suffer from none of the distortions which can result from the ambivalence of a ruler subject situation (Manley 1974: 146).

The guiding principles for revitalizing the Jamaican nation and making the educational system a source of inspiration begin with the affirmation that Jamaica is predominantly a black nation whose ancestral motherland is West Africa. The only way to destroy the psychosocial controls constituted by European imperialism is to set the historical record straight. This is the self-liberation of which Garvey spoke. Once this has been accomplished, the nation will find a perennial source of strength in its past (Sherlock/Bennett 1998: 410).

In their 1998 history titled *The Story of the Jamaican People*, Sir Philip Sherlock and Hazel Bennett revise colonialist historiography as their original approach offers a first time interpretation by Jamaicans rather than former colonialists; and hardly surprising, their account differs remarkably from earlier investigations in that they make Africa a cultural reference point as significant as Great Britain, if not even more so. The final chapter “Culture and nationhood” is of particular relevance to the study of dance, since the authors refer to the important role of the arts in the process of Jamaican nation-building during the pre- and post-Independence era. Almost forty years after Jamaica’s national independence in 1962, they argue that the outspoken Afrocentrism appears as a likely response to what Michael Manley had called for about twenty years earlier, when demanding the recovery of Africa as Jamaica’s “own culture at the moment of the colonial intervention” (Nettleford 2003: 68). In comparison to other Caribbean islands that have been more hesitant to proclaim an Africanist identity, Jamaica’s proud declaration of ‘blackness’ dates back to the island’s turbulent history of slave revolt and subsistence. Jamaican Afrocentrism must therefore be perceived in the historical context of plantation economy and slavery, since black identity politics first of all aimed at a positive self-(re)evaluation.

While other Caribbean islands may have adopted more assimilatory identity discourses, Mervyn Alleyne has convincingly argued that African Jamaican identity politics have more than enough good reason to resist such self-deception. Following his argument, Jamaica’s African focus is thus based on the continuity of the island’s dominant Akan-Twi retention, which went into the living testimony of Jamaica’s African Creole religions Myalism, Pukumina and Revival (Alleyne 2002: 199; 201). In addition, Jamaican history has also witnessed a quite unusual consistency of continuous slave rebellion for the region as a consequence of white planter absenteeism and the brutality of the plantation attorneys and overseers in charge. At the same time though, Jamaican slave resistance occasioned what Alleyne calls a “symbiotic relationship between ethnicity, preservation of African culture, and resistance, one manifestation of which was the desire to maintain a physical distance from the white population” (2002: 202). Hence, Jamaica’s Maroon heritage is of particular importance in this context.

As early as 1655, when the British troupes defeated the Spanish, various slaves fled into the mountain areas. The majority of these first runaway slaves (= “Maroons”) were of Akan (Ashanti) origin, an ethnic

group renowned for their rebellious warriors. Ashanti thus assembled with the island's remaining Arawak Indians to form an independent community. In strategic alliance, both groups managed to safe-guard and maintain many of their former cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup> The Maroon's 1738/39 peace treaty with Great Britain had first granted freedom to their community so that, historically, the Maroons were the first African Jamaicans to obtain independence. In comparison to the African slaves on the plantations, Maroons were therefore able to live and re-create their own cultural practices, comparatively free from the European influence. Noted especially for its powerful Myal-Men, who were successfully practicing herbal medicine and healing ritual, "Maroon society [...] was able to act as a catalyst and give form to the resurgence of African identity and consciousness during and especially after slavery," as Cheryl Ryman has pointed out (1980: 5). So while ethnic division between different African groups existed and led to rivalries and disputes, the common fate of slavery forced their alliance in revolt (Barnett 1979: 22).

Among the basic cultural commonalities between these different West African traditions, Sheila Barnett lists ancestor worship, possession, adoration of the earth as universal force and community base, secret societies, yam festivals, impersonation of the spirit world through masquerade and festival, the use of song, drums and dancing in ritual as well as the belief in shamanism (1979: 22-24).<sup>2</sup> Religion, dance and music have thus from the very beginning of the colonial contact been integral to the process of African Jamaican identity formation. Since traditional dances survived mostly within former and still existing Maroon communities, it is hardly surprising that up until today, the African Jamaican folk retention remains strongest in their outreach area, namely, in the parishes of Portland, St. Thomas, St. Mary, St. Elizabeth, Hanover and Westmoreland (Ryman 1980: 5).

After Emancipation in 1834/38, yet another exodus of slaves to Jamaica's secluded mountain areas occurred and contributed further to a more stringent continuity of African derived cultural practices. Between 1841 and 1867 further 10,000 Africans came from Sierra Leone

---

- 1 Sheila Barnett has commented upon the similarity between Arawak and African belief systems and worship practices (1979: 20).
- 2 "Shamanism," which is of North Central Asian etymological origin, is here conceived of as "an ancient kind of performance practiced by specialists in healing and trance, employing music, dance, masks, and objects" (Schechner 2002: 168).

and the Kru Coast to Jamaica and settled mainly in the parishes of St. Mary, St. Thomas and Westmoreland (Alleyne 2002: 208). These later African laborers practiced the Kongo derived folk religion which should over time become known as Jamaican Kumina, as well as the Yoruba based Etu of Hanover and Nago of Westmoreland. Alleyne highlights the importance of Maroon interrelations with these other African groups as both of their cultural retentions created a mutually enriching cultural exchange to ultimately generate the backbone of Jamaica's rich Neo-African heritage.<sup>3</sup> African Jamaican identity has thus come to define itself by the proud concept of *marronage*, which as the formerly defiant strategy of runaway slaves represents the African Jamaican struggle towards cultural emancipation (Alleyne 20002: 209).

Against the more assimilatory discourses of French-Caribbean *métissage* and *créolité*, Jamaican *marronage* has thus called rhetorical attention to effective black resistance in "a world and a Caribbean where there is growing hybridity and where 'white' values dominate and are still rampant" (Alleyne 2002: 194). Jamaica's national motto "Out of Many, One People," may therefore appear relative, because it in fact presents "some degree of denial of, and distancing from, the concrete reality of the dominance of black in the ethnic composition of Jamaica" (Alleyne 2002: 194). For many Jamaicans *marronage*, hence, conceptualizes a distinct Afrocentric identification, which calls for special consideration and articulation from the national side, when Alleyne concludes:

Jamaican history is replete with the struggles of the black population to assert its ethnicity in the context of resistance to slavery. Whereas slave revolts and uprisings were typical of all slave regimes throughout the Caribbean and the New World, Jamaica had more than a full share; and it was not simply a matter of uprisings or acts of rebellion and resistance, but rather of organized revolts. These had as their goals, not merely an escape by individuals from the harshness of slavery, but the desire to create a way of life based on a cultural and spiritual allegiance to Africa (2002: 218).

---

3 Cheryl Ryman coined the term "Neo-African," which according to her definition "is used to refer to those forms developed in the new world by African peoples, who draw largely on a body of cultural knowledge (African) to interpret both the new environment and cultural modes" (Ryman 1984a: 13).

And indeed, a large number of African-derived cultural practices have survived colonization and certainly support this claim for “spiritual alliance.” Predominantly derived from the retention of African religions and their rituals, these are still significantly manifest in Jamaica’s rich performative/performance heritage of today.

## Early African Jamaican Religious and Recreational Dances

Todo el arte nace en la religión [...] pues sin una idea previa y clara del carácter consustancialmente religioso y mágico que entre los negros africanos tienen originariamente el verso, el canto, la música y el baile, estas expresiones de su arte no podrán ser debiamente comprendidas, ni en sus múltiples manifestaciones, ni en sus instrumentos, ni en su historia (Ortiz 1965: 186).<sup>4</sup>

### Obeah/Myalism

Historically, Obeah and Myalism are the earliest two African Jamaican religious practices – documented by Sir Edward Long in 1760 – which give evidence of African-derived medicine and possessional dancing (see Long 1774). Long’s descriptions, however, must be read with caution as they represent the colonial bias of his time and cultural background. Obeah has thus misleadingly been described as “black magic” and witchcraft, a tradition that was further pursued by renowned gothic novelist Monk Lewis in his *West Indies journal* (Lewis 1834: 91-93). As Brathwaite points out though, Obeah has likely been stigmatized by colonialist discourse in order to undermine its empowering healing, community generating, and magical/revolting effects (1993: 193-194). Whether Obeah has, therefore, correctly been reported to cause ‘evil spells,’ which Myalism could then successfully counteract has, as of yet, not been convincingly decided (Schuler 1979: 65).<sup>5</sup> As

---

4 All art is born from religion [...] therefore, without a previous and clear idea of the consubstantially religious and magical character which verse, song, music and dance have among Negro-Africans, their art cannot be understood, neither in its multiple manifestations, nor in its instruments, nor in its history (engl. transl.).

5 Cheryl Ryman supports Schuler’s claim in her discussion of Jamaican Kumina by stating that “Obeah refers to the sorcery tradition or the primarily evil intentions of the specialist who manipulates the “powers” available to him through the earthbound spirits and “scientific” objects or keys, while Myal refers to the just administration and healing capabilities of Man [...]”(1984: 87).

Ryman suggests, "the form that was most likely to "go public" in Jamaica was Myal, the good" (1984: 88). Whereas Obeah, the alleged 'evil' practice went strategically underground. It appears therefore more than likely that Obeah and Myal as pre-emancipation religious practices were actually complementary rather than exclusive, traces of which may still be found in Kumina and certain Revival practices thereafter.<sup>6</sup>

According to Ryman, Myal traditionally "has been viewed as *the religious core of Afro Jamaican culture*" (1980: 5). Referring to Myal as a pos-sessional dance practice, Ryman, Schuler and Patterson have listed several common characteristics in their studies, which all assume an overall positive, i.e. healing effect of the dance. Patterson, for example, argues that Myal was conducted in good faith to cause immunity against physical infliction by white oppressors as well as to impose "the power to restore life" on the dancer (1967: 186). As Monk Lewis observed in his journal of 1834:

The Obeah ceremonies always commence with what is called, by the negroes, 'the Myal dance'. This is intended to remove any doubt of the chief Obeah-man's supernatural powers; and in the course of it, he undertakes to show his art by killing one of the persons present, whom he pitches upon for that purpose. He sprinkles various powders over the devoted victim, blows upon him, and dances round him, obliges him to drink a liquor prepared for the occasion, and finally the sorcerer and his assistants seize him and whirl him rapidly round and round till the man loses his senses, and falls on the ground to all appearance and the belief of the spectators a perfect corpse. The chief Myal-man then utters loud shrieks, rushes out of the house with wild and frantic gestures, and conceals himself in some neighboring wood. At the end of two or three hours he returns with a large bundle of herbs, from some of which he squeezes the juice into the mouth of the dead person; with others he anoints his eyes and stains the tips of his fingers, accompanying the ceremony with a great variety of grotesque actions, and chanting all the while something between a song and a howl, while the assistants hand in hand dance

---

6 The difference between Obeah and Myal can furthermore be regarded as structural rather than moral, since practitioners are often versed in both traditions. Thus, Markus Coester (2004) has argued that while Obeah refers to the healing practice of an individual, Myal was practiced in groups. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert similarly suggest that Myal presented but another version of Obeah, sharing its healing/medicinal function, yet being practiced in group worship rather than by individual consultation (2003: 142).

slowly round them in a circle, stamping the ground loudly with their feet to keep time with his chant. A considerable time elapses before the desired effect is produced, but at length the corpse gradually recovers animation, rises from the ground perfectly recovered, and the Myal dance concludes (222-223).

Described as a “dance ritual of ‘death’ and ‘resurrection,’” Myal thus assumed a direct individual and social function as it was employed as a means of healing, resistance and rebellion (Patterson 1967: 190-191).<sup>7</sup> Schuler also points out that the dance generated “good fortune” among the participants and, moreover, that it protected them from disease and death which were believed to derive “from spiritual sources and required the performance of appropriate ritual” (Schuler 1979: 65-67). Due to the comparatively insignificant impact of Christianity before Emancipation, such ritual practice went relatively unnoticed as long as it did not disturb the alleged peace of the plantation. In contrast to the colonies under Catholic denomination, this was one of the peculiarities of the Caribbean colonies under Protestant rule, where planters up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century did not care too much about the spiritual salvation of their slaves.

Once the slaves were introduced to the teachings of the bible though, the Holy Book’s epistemic power was soon appropriated to their own emancipatory ends. With the advent of black Baptist preachers in 1791 and the support of the growing abolitionist movement – slave trade was officially abolished in 1807 – the end of slavery could not be protracted for very much longer. Non-conformist churches such as the Methodists and Baptists played a decisive role in spurring the slaves’ Emancipation movement. While the Methodists focused on the smaller group of free blacks predominantly in the Kingston area, Baptist preachers incited the masses of black slaves during that period. Lead by African American ex-slaves, the Baptist movement succeeded for one reason, because preacher and slave shared a common experience of oppression and suffering. Furthermore, the Baptists’ leader-system bore strong resemblance to that of the spiritual leaders of Jamaican Myalism. From this structural similarity emerged more and more independent Jamaican Baptist branches as both practices continuously syncretized. It is therefore hardly surprising that after Emancipation orthodox church membership was abandoned for those more

7 Monk Lewis’ journal, for example, refers to Obeah’s magic spells and the Obeah-man’s frequent poisoning of water wells (1834: 221).

native versions of belief. The strategic alliance between Baptist preachers and slaves against the planter oppressor thus led to an African-Christian syncretism, which laid the foundation for Jamaican Revivalism (Patterson 1967: 214-215).

Under the influence of Baptism, Myalism underwent significant changes. Myalists, for example, adopted the Holy Spirit among their ancestors and gods in the spirit pantheon, as well as they affirmed the practice of baptism by immersion. The Holy Spirit would entrance a practitioner in Myal dance as likely as the river baptism could embody an African river spirit. In its syncretic combination of African and Christian ritual, Myalism became highly significant and in the end far more successful than the Baptist creed. As Schuler expatiates:

The Myal notion of sin as sorcery, an offence not against God but against society, made it far more this-world oriented than the Baptist faith. Myal ritual offered a cure for society's ills which, since they were caused by sorcery, could be eradicated by antisorcery ritual. For this reason Myalism was far more relevant to many Afro-Jamaicans than any missionary version of the Christian faith. It attracted new followers on the north coast in the 1830s and 1840s and mounted anti-European offensives in both decades, demonstrating a continued Afro-Jamaican awareness of the major source of their misfortune in the nineteenth century (1979: 69).

The masters' hesitancy to Christianize their slaves thus turned out to be more reasonable than they might have originally been aware of: not because of the slaves' alleged ignorance, but rather because of their smart cunning. Since the bible taught humility and respect, the demand for freedom could no longer be denied.

However, after Emancipation had officially been obtained in 1834, sectionalism between the impoverished black masses, white upper and the brown middle class still posed an insurmountable obstacle to an integrative societal effort. Even worse, the church now started to ban all of the African derived religious practices as they regarded them as "heathenish" and, more significantly, a distraction from work. Obeah and Myal were attacked for their "demoralizing and pernicious influence," yet survived despite of the colonial opposition by integrating Christian saints and apostles in the African spirit pantheon (Hill 1992: 261). So while African-derived folk religion was rigorously demonized by the ministers of the established denominations, it still managed to thrive under the impact of newly arriving indentured workers from Af-

rica after Emancipation. Kumina, next to the 1860s Great Revival, thus emerged as the two powerful African Jamaican religions, regardless of their continuous ban by the public officials.<sup>8</sup>

### Funeral Rites

Another important element of religious cultural survival encompasses the complex of West African derived funeral rites, which in the mind of suffering slaves were believed to smoothen the passage home to Africa (Pigou 1987: 24). Even though these rites also underwent significant change through the impact of slavery, migration, and Christian missionary activities, various African forms of religious worship were nonetheless maintained. Today, those related to death are still the most prevalent. Elizabeth Pigou lists the following West African/African Jamaican beliefs that can be traced:

1. The individual has three 'components' – body, spirit/soul, *duppy*.
2. Death is an extended event, marking the end of mortal life, and the passage to immortality.
3. At death the spirit returns to the Supreme God and joins other spirits. This phase is perceived as being a type of journey.
4. At death the *duppy* or shadow wanders for several days, after which it must be laid to rest by special rites. If these rites are not carried out, the *duppy* may wander indefinitely and is capable of carrying evil acts, through the manipulation of sorcerers or through natural and psychic phenomena. During the interval between clinical death and the time the *duppy* is laid to rest, the individual is not considered fully dead. The purpose of funeral rites is to secure the safe journey of the spirit as well as to placate the *duppy* (1987: 24).

Dance and spirit possession play an integral part of these ceremonies. Commenting on the festival character of Jamaican funeral rites, Patterson also claims that they served as a "re-interpretation of the common African belief that on death one rejoins one's ancestors" (1967: 198). Among the common funeral practices belonged the nine-night ritual, ancestor worship and possessional dancing (Patterson 1967: 195-199).

Jamaican "nine-nights," which are preformed to accompany the deceased spirit's final departure, combine several African as well as

---

8 Kumina and Revival will both be discussed in detail for the context of NDTc choreography.

Christian elements. To safeguard the spirit's journey, nine-night ceremonies are held by family and friends of the deceased in order to remember and entertain the dead spirit. Food is offered, sermons, hymns and songs given in order to smooth the passage from this into the other world (Pigou 1987: 25). Celebratory in nature, Jamaican nine-nights thus stress the continuity of life in death as they accompany the liminal transition phase of the spirit ("duppy") to join the ancestors. As such, these rituals are a strong manifestation of the community generating West African belief system, which unites the ritual's practitioner to his people as well as his gods, ancestors and the unborn.

### **"Recreation aroun' da Bood ..."<sup>9</sup> – The Jonkonnu Masquerade**

Apart from the religious sources of African survival in Jamaica, recreational practices formed the second larger complex of that retention. While accounts of the slaves' religious rituals are extremely scarce – as they had to be held in secrecy – there is more documented evidence of their "occasional week nights and ends of dance and sing," as well as of course the well known seasonal holidays of Christmas, Easter, Crop-over and Yam festival during the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Patterson 1967: 232). The earliest reference to slaves' masquerades under the name of "Jonkonnu" has been made by Edward Long (1774: 424).<sup>10</sup>

---

- 9 The quote refers to the first line of a famous Bruckins song, first introduced a year after full Emancipation from slavery 1839. A detailed discussion of Bruckins Party will follow in the context of NDTc choreography.
- 10 Masquerade characters, however, had been described by Hans Sloane even earlier than that: "The Negros are much given to Venery, and although hard wrought, will at nights, or on Feast days Dance and Sing; their Songs are all bawdy, and leading that way. They have several sorts of Instruments in imitation of Lutes, made of small Gourds fitted with Necks, strung with Horse hairs, or the peeled stalks of climbing Plants or Withs. These Instruments are sometimes made of hollow'd Timber covered with Parchment or other Skin wetted, having a Bow for its Neck, the Strings ty'd longer or shorter, as they would alter their sounds. The Figures of some of these Instruments are hereafter graved. They have likewise in their Dances Rattles ty'd to their Legs and Wrists, and in their Hands, with which they make a noise, keeping time with one who makes a sound answering it on the mouth of an empty Gourd or Jar with his Hand. Their Dances consist in great activity and strength of Body, and keeping time, if it can be. They very often tie Cows Tails to their Rumps, and add such other odd things to their Bodies in several places, as gives them a very extraordinary appearance (1707: xlvi-xlix).

Ryman, however, has claimed that Jonkonnu as a “Neo-African form” could likely also have been an originally religious practice which only in its historical development became increasingly entertaining in content, as it today presents a rather symbolic/satirical than religious tradition. Since African slaves carried with them a variety of performance modes from different ethnic backgrounds, their individual heritage formed a residual presence in each cultural blend. Apart from the before mentioned rituals, performances involved mime and acrobatics as well as communal song and dance (Hill 1992: 218).

On behalf of Jonkonnu it has therefore been argued that the secular masquerade might have originally developed from African secret societies, namely Poro and Egungun (Ryman 1984a: 16).<sup>11</sup> In these societies the full-body mask embodies the ancestor spirit, yet it may also appear in a secular/entertainment context (Wynter 1970: 38). Because sacred and secular spheres are not strictly separated in West African cosmologies, Ryman and Wynter both suggest that an early interrelationship of religious Jonkonnu and Myal practice might have occurred. Thus Ryman states an early stage of Jonkonnu (1655-1775) that was hardly European influenced and maintained much of the original African ancestor worship tradition. Typical characters of this phase, still to be found today, are Horsehead and Cowhead, which accompanied by musicians give solo performances rather than group appearances (Ryman 1984a: 14).<sup>12</sup> According to Ryman’s historical time chart, the second stage (1775-1838) was marked by the appearance of the set girls and other British influenced masks. At this time the masquerade reflected more of the social reality of plantation society. For example, the

11 Compare also Sylvia Wynter “Jonkonnu in Jamaica. Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process,” *Jamaica Journal* 4.2 (1970): 38ff.; as well as Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean. Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures* (Kingston: U of the West Indies P, 2003) 223-224, where she addresses the interconnectedness of Myal and Jonkonnu practice and suggests a Kongo derived etymology of the term, which she spells “jonkunu” as according to “nza (Ko) ‘world, universe’ + a ‘of’ + kunu ~ nkunu (Ko) ‘ancestors, spirits’ (224).

12 The Cowhead mask can be regarded as the first masquerade wearing “oxhorns” and referred to as “Jonkonnu” (Ryman 1984: 17). Ryman describes the context of African symbology related to this figure: “In Africa, horned figures have been linked to the strength and power invested in important personages by virtue of their superior physical, political or supernatural attributes. They have most commonly been associated with warriors, funerals, initiation/circumcision ceremonies, and secret societies” (17).

set girls were strictly segregated by skin phenotype into brown, black and several shades between (Ryman 1984a: 19) and wore elaborate costume as has been documented by Isaac Mendes Belisario's 1836 sketches (see below). Also the appearance of the "House Jonkonnu," as documented, commented on the social power hierarchy. As Ryman denotes:

The 'house' bears scalloped pillars in imitation of the wooden supports used for balconies. This was a common feature of West Indian architecture and specifically of the Great House which became a symbol of power, privilege and oppression. [...] The dance and house filled with puppets (sailors, soldiers, slaves at work, etc.) embodied many of the characters and elements of nineteenth century Jamaican society and could be viewed as a microcosm of the larger, more elaborate, Jonkonnu/Masquerade tradition that was emerging (1984a: 20).



*The Red Set Girls and Jack-in-the-Green, drawn at Christmas 1836, in Kingston, Jamaica by Isaac Mendes Belisario lithographed by Duperly in 1837 (rpt. in: Nunley/Bettelheim 1988: 46).*



*House John-Canoe drawn by Isaac Mendes Belisario at Christmas 1836 and lithographed by Duperly in Kingston, Jamaica in 1837 (rpt. in: Nunley/Bettelheim 1988: 48).*

The so-called “Actor Groups” were also part of that newly emerging tradition. They performed excerpts from Shakespeare, which subsumed “all with the recurring theme of a fight over a female, a duel to the death, quickly followed by a ‘wild’ dance, in which even the resurrected dead were enticed to join” (Ryman 1984a: 21). The death and resurrection theme of British plays did of course echo the similar motif in Myal practice so that a sociologically empowering blend of both sources might likely have occurred.



*Koo-Koo or Actor Boy John-Canoe, drawn by Isaac Mendes Belisario, Christmas 1836 in Kingston, Jamaica and published by Duperly in 1837 (rpt. in: Nunley/Bettelheim 1988: 47).*

As Wynter has outlined, West African resurrection rites transformed not only the deceased for whom they were held, but also the dancing practitioners. Myal dance became "a war ritual, and extension of the 'martial dances' danced at funerals, of the binding force of ancestor worship" (1970: 41). When in 1774 laws against Obeah and Myal were passed, Jonkonnu as the more secular – allegedly merely entertaining and therefore harmless – practice became obviously more favored than the other two in the colonizer's eyes. Furthermore, as the early Actor Groups relied heavily on mime, music and dance, a connection to the Egungun traveling companies, has also been hypothesized (Ryman 1984a: 21). It is therefore important to realize that despite the ongoing creolization process, Jamaican Jonkonnu rather reinforced its African elements than those of the European carnival/mummers tradition.

By 1825 Patterson distinguishes two schools of Jonkonnu's alleged "amusement:" the one tending towards the more African aesthetic of the "goombay" drum and dance, the other, more European in style,

employing fiddle and reel to accompany Scottish dances.<sup>13</sup> Particularly, Christmas with the free floating 'John Canoe' masqueraders and set girl processions became an important outlet to level the social power imbalance. Slaves performed under the name of one of their more prominent white masters and thus stood suddenly on comparatively equal ground. Even if only for that exclusive moment of time, the "possession of the great house" generated a transgressive function, which Cynric R. Williams historical comment elucidates. He states:

Indeed a perfect equality seemed to reign among all parties; many came and shook hands with their master and mistress, nor did the young ladies refuse this salutation any more than the gentlemen. The merriment became rather boisterous as the punch operated, and the slaves sang satirical philippics against their master, communicating a little free advice now and then; but they never lost sight of decorum, and at last retired, apparently quite satisfied with their saturnalia, to dance the rest of the night at their own habitations (1826: 22-23).

Unsurprisingly, Jonkonnu's satirical punch-lines and role reversals became more and more important to the slaves' struggle for emancipation. As Sam Sharpe's 1831 Christmas rebellion, as well as the necessity of "Christmas Guards" to prevent the increasing danger of insurrections had shown, Jonkonnu performatively rehearsed direct rebellion and unrest, quite unlike European carnival, which rather restores than undoes its order by the end of the feast.<sup>14</sup>

---

13 This differentiation parallels that of Judith Bettelheim, who in her research of Jamaican Jonkonnu has distinguished between "fancy dress," i.e. European-derived and "rural," i.e. African-derived forms (see Bettelheim 1988). Gumbay drums, which are seminal to Jonkonnu, also feature in Yoruba Egungun plays (Wynter 1970: 39). Ryman refers to Gumbay as "the purest form of the once popular Myal dance, when she explains: "In Jamaica, the term Gumbay and its variants (Gumbi, Gumbay, Gumbahi, Guma, Goumbay) have been separately and collectively associated with a drum, a herb, removal of 'witchcraft' or 'sorcery' and a dance-music form linked to traditional Jamaican religious-healing practices, formerly associated with Myal" (1984b: 54).

14 Born in Montego Bay, Sam Sharpe became the leader of the late 1820s strike movement to lay down labor on the estates to call for salary and freedom. Between 25,000 to 40,000 slaves withdrew from work and fought for freedom during the "Western Liberation Uprisings" which lasted from 28 Dec. 1831 until end of March 1832 (Sherlock 212-221).

Religious and recreational practices formed the backbone of African Jamaican resistance and they should later on become the dominant expression of Jamaica's African Creole cultural identity. Since these practices arose from the slaves' folk culture, the folk-cultural domain assumed particular historical relevance, because it marked the beginning of the decolonization process and independence movement. African survivals in the guise of an adapted Myalism thus chaperoned Emancipation and the spirit of *marronage* guided likewise the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion. Ultimately, grassroots culture ushered right into Jamaican national independence. From then on, folk integrity, music and dance should increasingly be identified as Jamaica's new national icons, when dance theatre launched African Caribbean folklore onto the world stage.

## **Pioneers of Caribbean Dance Theatre**

### **Beryl McBurnie (1914-2000)**

In the programme brochure of a 1982 exhibition at Jamaica's National Library titled "Our heritage in Dance" the beginning of the Caribbean dance movement is credited to two women pioneers:

The 1940s represented the turning point in the performing arts of dance in Jamaica. The combined influence of people like Beryl McBurnie and Lavinia Williams, as well as the work of the YWCA and Jamaica Welfare, in bringing folk dances to the fore, all resulted in a new attitude to dance: Dance was now regarded as an instrument of self expression and self identity and as such should reflect the new national consciousness that had emerged among Jamaicans.

While U.S. born Lavinia Williams, a disciple of Katherine Dunham, had studied Haitian folklore, Beryl McBurnie, was a Trinidadian dancer who would become known as the Caribbean's "mother of dance." Though Katherine Dunham and Lavinia Williams have both credited McBurnie for her influence on their technique and U.S. modern dance in general, McBurnie has been even more influential on Ivy Baxter and the founding of Jamaica's National Dance Theatre Company. Therefore, in order to review the history of Caribbean modern dance theatre, one needs to start with McBurnie's early dance beginnings.

Beryl McBurnie had developed an early interest in Caribbean folk dance, when as a child she took part in a variety of extracurricular activities such as theatre and concerts. Discontented with the colonial education system of her local school, she soon advocated the need of a more local training. As Michael Anthony in a commemorative article for *Trinidad Express* described McBurnie's pioneering attitude:

Although Beryl was only a child when she began dancing, she apparently seemed to know exactly what she was doing and where she was going – or rather, where she wanted to go. For example, it took a lot out of her to perform the Scottish reels, jigs, and other British folk dances that the teacher at her school, Tranquility Girls', placed before them all the time. Those dances might have been delightful, but to her mind they were just a little irrelevant. For apart from their beauty of movement, they gave expression of a personality and experience that were not her own. What she hankered after was expressing, in dance, the way of life and aspects of the history of her own environment (2000: 20-21).

McBurnie's vision of Caribbean dance was consequently to be "expressive of the emotions of the folk" and set up against the prevalent "admiration of things British" of her time, when "anything smacked of Africa was regarded as belonging to the jungle" (Anthony 2000: 20-21). Supported by Carlton Comma and folklorist Andrew Carr, McBurnie studied Trinidadian folklore in order to build her indigenous dance repertoire. Growing up in the Protestant neighborhood of Woodbrook, McBurnie's father aspired to a career in medicine for his daughter, who came to attend Columbia Teacher's College in New York in 1938. Once in New York, however, McBurnie resigned from medicine and took further classes in dance and theatre arts instead. She studied at the Academy of Allied Arts with Charles Weidman and José Limón as well as at Columbia with Martha Graham and Elsa Findlay and also taught classes in Caribbean dance herself while she was there (Creque-Harris 1991: 91).

McBurnie returned to Trinidad in 1940, where she and her dance troupe presented the show *A Trip Through the Tropics*. The performances consisted of classical as well as folk interpretations in order to adhere to the still prevalent colonial tastes of her time (Creque-Harris 1991: 91). The following year McBurnie left her company to the supervision of Boscoe Holder, Geoffrey Holder's older brother and a talented dancer and painter in his own right. That way, McBurnie could con-

tinue her studies in New York, where she became known as "La Belle Rosette" and started a highly promising career to which a series of photographs by Carl van Vechten at the New York Public Library of Performing Arts still testifies. McBurnie's captivating beauty of expression on these still photographs speaks of her stage presence at the time. In 1942 Pearl Primus also took classes at the New Dance Studio, where the born Trinidadian soon joined McBurnie's company in a series of concerts (Hillsman 1984: 20-25). The program of one of these held at the Y.M.H.A. that same year consisted of an interesting mix of different folk forms not only from Trinidad, but also Haiti and Cuba. McBurnie's dancers introduced Vodou and Shango rituals as well as those of the Trinidadian Shouters, a Cuban Marriage ceremony, folk songs, calypso and drum rhythms to their New York audiences (Foulkes 2002: 92-94). McBurnie's New York based company continued to give performances at several of the New York colleges. As Alvin Ailey Dance Company acknowledged in a 1978 tribute, McBurnie's influence on the development of U.S. modern dance expression counts her among "one of the three extraordinary Black women who have had a profound influence on American dance," i.e. next to Katherine Dunham's and Pearl Primus' pioneering choreography of the time.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, even though Columbia University had offered McBurnie a permanent teaching position, she could not desert her island and people for too long, to whom she had already once returned briefly in 1942. Offered work as dance instructor for the Education Department of Trinidad and Tobago, McBurnie decided to return home for good in 1945. As dance instructor she successfully introduced folk dances to the schools at home and she also managed to assemble further folk material from several of the other Caribbean islands. Her travels took McBurnie to Cayenne, Brazil and Suriname. It was during this period of her own research that she met Earl Leaf, whose *Isles of Rhythm* (1948) is of particular interest for its collection of rare pictures which document some of the folk-based dances as seen at the time.<sup>16</sup> By 1948 then McBurnie had certainly collected more than enough of experience, training, and dance repertoire to eventually found her own dance theatre company.

The official opening of Beryl McBurnie's *Little Carib* Theatre and Dance Company was launched on 25 Nov. 1948. Special guest for the

---

15 "McBurnie: A Great Life," *Trinidad Guardian* 31 March 2000: 1.

16 Creque-Harris suggests that much of the book was in fact influenced by Leaf's collaborative exchange with McBurnie.

festive occasion was African American singer Paul Robeson, who had been touring Trinidad at the time. The foreword of the opening program Talking Drums expresses the inspiring ferment that the *Little Carib* presented to Trinidadian society at the time. Thus, one may read that the *Little Carib* Theatre was hailed for representing an “accomplishment” as well as a “symbol” of the West Indian emancipatory spirit, deeply indebted to the African folk heritage, which had been “brought into these Caribbean islands in the hell-holds of slave-ships”.<sup>17</sup> Consisting of three parts, the night’s dance program opened with “Outlines and Illustrations,” featuring McBurnie and her company in what appears from the arrangement to have been modeled on her New York lecture demonstration format.

Each section referred to the history and development of McBurnie’s Caribbean movement vocabulary. Starting with *Early Days*, the demonstration illustrated the background of the Caribbean’s different ethnic rhythms and influences (“Carib, French, African, English, East Indian”) and was suggested to be read by the audience as: “An attribute of man’s nature and the foundation of all art.” This was followed by *Movement*, which elaborated on different rhythms (“Individual”, “Life”, “Native and Elements”, “Primitive”) and *Modern Dance*, which presented the basics teachings of contemporary dance training (“Simple Technique, extensions, contractions and releases...”). The final part “Typical West Indian Rhythms” ended on a Caribbean theme, and the evening concluded with different folk choreographies interpreting ordinary life-scenes (“The Fields”, “Market Scene”, “Three Peasants”), ritual dances and drumming.<sup>18</sup>

Not only a theatre, but educational center, too, McBurnie’s *Little Carib* dance theatre presented an important innovation, which accorded to the prevalent societal debate on independence politics and the emerging West Indies postcolonial nationalism of the time. In his address to McBurnie’s opening night, Dr. Eric Williams – future president of independent Trinidad and Tobago – outlined the dance theatre’s social significance for the Caribbean context. Dance theatre was lauded as “the job of West Indians” in the sense that McBurnie’s original interpretations of West Indian folklore contributed to the West Indies’ articulation of independent “inter-nationalism,” which Williams defined as the

17 “Formal Opening of the ‘Little Carib’ Thursday November 25, 1948 at 9 p.m.” Souvenir Programme 1948/1988 (Kingston: University of the West Indies, Main Library) 3.

18 “Formal Opening of the ‘Little Carib’” Souvenir Programme 10-11.

region's "distinctive contribution, not only to the life of our people in the West Indies, but also to the stream of that broad intellectual culture which, the more diversified it is, yet expresses the common humanity of our one, tortured world."<sup>19</sup>

McBurnie had started her theatre in the backyard of her mother's gallery, where she provided a stage for dance and steelband concerts to integrate those marginalized folk expressions into her more conservative neighborhood of strict Protestant upbringing. Molly Ahye described the homely atmosphere at the local gathering point, where "commonfolk rubbed shoulder to shoulder with the elite as the music after a performance became the magic ingredient for mixing" (1983: 49). In dialogue with CLR James and Eric Williams, McBurnie became part of the independence movement of her time. As her country's "ambassador" of culture, she and the *Little Carib* Dance Theatre Company were sent to England and Canada in order to advocate her island's independent spirit. On her 1951 visit to London McBurnie was applauded. Critic Charles Archibald put her in line with Victor Reid, Edgar Mittelholzer and Derek Walcott as the artistic vanguard of the British Caribbean's "new culture" and advocates for national independence. He wrote:

These artists are proving to be correct what the politicians have been saying for different reasons – that the British Caribbean is not a secondhand Great Britain, or United States, or France, or Spain, or Africa, or India, but a region possessing its own original spirit which has only to be given its freedom to assert itself against all comers (1951: n.p.).

In her London performances McBurnie adhered to the lecture-demonstration format which proved successful in providing her audience with the ethno-historical background information of her dances, which might otherwise have too easily been consumed as mere 'exotica.' As was appreciated by a London correspondent of the *Public Opinion* in 1951:

The lecture-demonstration showed historically the influence of the different cultures upon West Indian folklore. It was brilliantly done. First, Miss McBurnie told the audience something of the origin and social significance of each dance before demonstrating the steps and movements. Starting with the aboriginal peoples of the West Indies – the Arawaks and Caribs, Miss

---

19 "Formal Opening of the 'Little Carib,'" Souvenir Programme 7.

McBurnie took the audience through the period of European conquest and settlement, showing the kind of dances introduced by the early Spaniards, such as the "Castilian"; the French "Beguine"; the British "Jig" as well as contributions in song made by the Portuguese such as the "Fado"; the Indian "Hosein festival", the Chinese and chiefly African influences.<sup>20</sup>

The company performed in a high quality entertainment evening, especially noted for its presentation of the African-Trinidadian Shango ritual. As the same critic concluded:

Miss McBurnie and her young dancers were very good in their rendering of street cries and street rhythms, which brought home to the audience many familiar cries heard in their homelands by street vendors but the significance of which they never before appreciated. The show was therefore not only theatrically entertaining, but anthropologically instructive even to many so-called educated West Indians.<sup>21</sup>

McBurnie's pioneer work in dance had to overcome similar prejudices as prevailed against folk culture and African-derived expressions in general. Her choreography *Shango* helped, however, much to overcome this notion, when it became one of the most critically acclaimed pieces of her repertoire. As Lenore Crawford in her 1958 review of the piece noted:

There was a dedicated feeling about every company member that was not apparent in some of the other numbers, a complete at-oneness with the whole presentation, plus a superb technique that reached a peak rarely equaled in the rest of the program. All these things gave an impact that left this viewer breathless from sheer excitement of a religious kind. Full proof of the force of dancing and the effect it can have was made clear. The choreography and the entire presentation, including magnificently performed music, were something rarely encountered in the finest dance companies (n.p.).

To dance Caribbean cultural folk heritage became apparently such a strong performance that it convinced even those who did not necessarily relate to that bodily memory from their own cultural background.

How much stronger then should prove the impact, when the *Little Carib* Company toured Jamaica, where similar traditions could be

---

20 "W.I. Dancer Takes London By Storm," *Public Opinion*, 17 Mar. 1951: n.p.

21 "W.I. Dancer Takes London By Storm," *Public Opinion*, 17 Mar. 1951: n.p.

found, yet were still largely neglected by the middle class strata of society. Invited to tour Jamaica for the 300-year centennial celebrations in 1955, McBurnie's visit contributed enormously to the mutual exchange of both islands that were not only to join culturally, but also in the short political Federation of 1958.<sup>22</sup> Inspiration from that side was very much expected, as one Jamaican *Gleaner* critic wondered about the "new impetus" her visit might provide for the local dance scene in terms of a cultural reawakening of "folk memory."<sup>23</sup> McBurnie's Jamaican programme *Gayap* presented the format of suites. Ahye describes those as "the exploration of themes for greater cohesion and substance" with an effort to combine "more elements into expanded synopses, which provided wider and more satisfying vehicles for expression" (Ahye 1983: 44). Apparently, there had been less of that structure in McBurnie's previous works. The show was much praised so that McBurnie returned to Jamaica only two years later, when she was engaged to teach dance at the summer school of the University College of the West Indies.

Her Jamaican dance workshop was attended by young student Derek Walcott, who undertook his studies there at the time. McBurnie's summer school should influence not only this meanwhile internationally renowned Nobel Literature laureate, but a whole generation of future Caribbean artists and intellectuals. Through Caribbean dance patterns, McBurnie introduced her pupils to the specificity and richness of West Indian expressiveness in gesture, lore, rhythm and rhyme. Moreover, her dance lessons provided this new generation of Caribbean intellectuals with a fuller understanding and appreciation of their multicultural heritage.<sup>24</sup> McBurnie's dances taught much more than only a few folk steps: in fact, she gave ethical advice in cultural diversity, artistic freedom and the power of expression as well. She knew though that many of her own class upbringing were still quite intimidated to wholly embrace and accept that diverse source of self-identity. As she started a lecture demonstration at the University College with the following rhetorical demand: "A multicoloured source of material exists from which we can tap, from time to time, programmes for theatrical presentation. The question is: are we prepared to accept what is originally ours, and not be afraid because it is simple and given to cottons

---

22 McBurnie, *Dance Trinidad Dance*, Booklet, n.d. 6.

23 "Spirit of the past with art of modern theatre," *Daily Gleaner* 14 Aug. 1955: n.p.

24 McBurnie, *Dance Trinidad Dance* 5-7.

and not silk? Or are we afraid because most of the vital expression of our folk material is of African origin?"<sup>25</sup>

McBurnie's impact on the Caribbean and, in fact, not only the Caribbean but internationally, too, was based on her vision of dance theatre as being the most appropriate representational tool to promote her culture and its development. Her anthropological research lent profound insight to each folk step in her repertoire, because it testified to a particular cultural tradition. As she explained:

Dance is the focus in line given to a particular experience. West Indians must continue to draw on the manifold cultural influences that have gone into our historical and cultural make-up and to reinterpret them in the light of our own experiences. In this way we can make a worthwhile contribution to a West Indian way of life. Our aim should be towards creating and maintaining a universal standard. We must ensure that the artistic contribution of West Indian people should be of such calibre that it will flow naturally into the broad stream of universal culture, expressive of the common humanity of our one world.<sup>26</sup>

McBurnie did much to enhance that vision in her career as dance choreographer and educator of those early days. As Mollie Graham in her review of the Company's performance at Canada's annual Stratford Festival in 1958 remarked: "If there is one thing that Stratford theatre-goers learned Wednesday evening, it is that there is a culture and talent in places other than Canada, Great Britain and the United States."<sup>27</sup> McBurnie's success thus rebutted the old time colonialist prejudice and achieved for the arts, what Dr. Eric Williams and Norman Manley fought for in politics: namely, the discovery and nurturing of a positive Caribbean self-understanding. As H.O.B. Wooding has described this stance on behalf of the *Little Carib*'s symbolical value, the company stood for the West Indies' postcolonial "self-discovery" and "love of our Islands, of our fields and flowers, of our wit and wisdom, of our pleasures and pastimes, of our sense and significance."<sup>28</sup>

25 Beryl McBurnie, "West Indian Dance," *The Artist in West Indian Society*, ed. Errol Hill (Kingston: University of the West Indies, Extra-Mural Studies, n.d.) 51.

26 McBurnie, "West Indian Dance" 54.

27 Mollie Graham, "Audience Is Delighted Here At Debut of Carib Dancers," *Beacon Herald* 18 Jul. 1958: n.p.

28 "Formal Opening of the 'Little Carib,'" *Souvenir Programme* 17.



*La Belle Rosette, circa 1940s. Photography by Earl Leaf (rpt. in: Leaf 1948: 175).*

Despite such love and adoration, McBurnie's Company remained, however, bound to the confinements of a largely volunteer effort. Insufficient financial support, lack of an appropriate theatrical space, and time for training and developing a more sophisticated technique slowly eroded the Company's promising beginnings. Dancers coming from different professions in life ("civil servants, teachers, commercial clerks and the like") could not always make the necessary time, even though they were extremely committed to their art form.<sup>29</sup> When McBurnie was awarded the due respect for her accomplishments in dance by Alvin Ailey Company in 1978 as one of the three influential "dames of black dance," her own beloved country could not provide the necessary funding to meet her challenging demands. The *Little Carib* was neither rebuilt nor financially supported as one of Trinidad's prime educational facilities. Yet, the seeds were sown and growing elsewhere in the Caribbean – Jamaica, McBurnie's befriended island of former federation.

---

29 McBurnie, *Dance Trinidad Dance 6.*

### Ivy Baxter (1923-1993)

Born in 1923, Ivy Baxter was a Jamaican physical education teacher with a training in ballet and modern dance of the London Sigurd Leeder School, who became the first appointed dance officer of Norman Manley's Social Welfare Commission in the 1950s and later on renowned as the pioneer of Jamaican pre-Independence dance theatre. While classical ballet had been the only dance taught in the 1930s, Baxter's memoirs recall that local ballet teachers Herma Dias and Hazel Johnston had already made slight attempts at integrating folk tunes and gestures into their dances as a result of the island's "awakening of arts" (Baxter 1970: 288). Jamaican ballet thus sought to integrate popular elements from "street meetings, dances and religious activities," which leading Jamaican comedians Louise Bennett and Ranny Williams had already successfully integrated in their Pantomime sketches (Baxter 1970: 291). As a pupil of Hazel Johnston, it seems that Baxter took her teacher's words seriously, when she started to pursue her own dance career. In her official position as a young adjudicator for Jamaica Welfare, Baxter received her first personal introduction to African Jamaican folk forms. Describing her early work as dance officer, she comments on the significance of festival for the Jamaican dance theatre context:

An important feature of the Jamaica Welfare work was the festival which took place at the end of a term or year of work in a village or town. Here, in gaily decorated school rooms or under plaited coconut boughs, groups would display handiwork, preserves, and most important of all, perform Jamaican folk material, song and dance. Sometimes there were performing festivals limited to solo singing, singing by choirs, plays, choral speaking, Jamaican folk songs, and traditional dances, or dances composed on Jamaican folk themes. Eliminations would take place far and wide in the parishes in the adjoining hill country villages. It was by this means that the author began to learn about folk material when called, barely out of high school, to help judge these performances (1970: 94).

As part of Manley's community outreach work Jamaica Welfare engaged in physical education as a means to compensate at least for some of the social unrest caused by the 1930s Depression. In co-operation with the Canadian Y.W.C.A. classes in creative dance were taught. Phyllis Stapells and Bretta Powells, two Canadian physical education teachers, came to the island, where their innovative dance classes

would challenge the local conception of classical dance. Due to their influence creative dance was slowly adapted from English country to Jamaican local tastes as this compositional approach “allowed the inherent movement style of Jamaicans to come through” (Baxter 1970: 296). According to Baxter, their teachings were also starting to interest people, who would have refrained from classical ballet because of their age or body physique (1970: 296).

Baxter founded her own company – called *Ivy Baxter Dance Group* – in 1950. In her early choreography she made a point in presenting stage dances with Jamaican themes and movement patterns, to which she had been introduced via her experience as dance officer.<sup>30</sup> Baxter had just founded her own company though, when she was offered a British Council scholarship to attend dance lessons at the London Sigurd Leeder School of European Ballet for one year. So Baxter – like McBurnie before her – left her company to someone else’s devices, namely, Herma Dias’ supervision, while she herself started dance class at the Leeder School in 1950/51. Though Baxter acknowledges Leeder’s influence in her memoirs, it is regrettably not very much elaborated on. Judging from her later work as well as from the Jamaican dance theatre aesthetics that were to be developed after her, it seems quite evident though that Leeder’s reforming approach fitted neatly into the Jamaican sensibility and political activism of the time.

Leeder’s liberal approach to dance as an art form had developed from the German expressionist school of dance. Collaborating with Kurt Jooss (1901-78) from 1924 until 1947, Leeder became the co-founder of the famous German Folkwangschule in Essen (1927) and later – fleeing from the oppressive Nazi regime, both Jooss and Leeder were forced to emigrate to England – the Jooss Leeder School of Dance in Dartington Hall, Devon (1934) (Müller 2001: 119-136). Their schools followed the teachings of Rudolf Laban and to some extent the aesthetics of Mary Wigman. Focusing on the individual experience of movement, the dancer’s own creative intuition was regarded as more important than the strict adherence to the traditional balletic movement canon. In that sense, “German Dance” as it was called for some time, appeared to be quite open to local re-inventions all over the world. As Jooss’ creative “credo” of 1932 announced:

---

30 “Our Heritage in Dance,” Exhibition Program.

Wir glauben an den Tanz als eine unabhängige und autonome Form des Theatres, eine Kunst, die nicht durch das gesprochene Wort ersetzt werden kann; seine Sprache ist die ausdrucksvolle Bewegung des menschlichen Körpers in reiner und stilisierter Form. Unsere Anstrengungen gelten vor allem dem theatralischen Tanz, den wir als die fruchtbarste Synthese von hoher dramatischer Ausdruckskraft und reinem Tanz betrachten. Wir streben nach einer Tanzkunst und einer Form der Choreographie, die gleichermaßen auf den Theorien und der Praxis des Neuen Modernen Tanzes und jenen des traditionellen klassischen Balletts aufbaut. Die Basis unserer Arbeit ist, den äußerst weitgespannten und umfassenden Bogen allen menschlichen Empfindens und Handelns in allen Phasen der unbegrenzten Wege sichtbar zu machen. Durch Konzentration auf das Wesentliche kommen wir zu unseren Tanzformen (in: Regitz 1996: 453-454).

We believe in dance as an independent and autonomous form of theatre, an art, which cannot be substituted by the spoken word; its language is the expressive movement of the human body in pure and stylized form. Our efforts concern primarily the theatrical dance, which we consider as the most fruitful synthesis of high dramatic expression and pure dance. We strive for a dance art and form of choreography, which likewise build on theories and practice of the New Modern Dance and those of traditional ballet. The basis of our work consists in making visible the uttermost widest and encompassing arch of all human emotion and action in all phases of their unlimited ways. Through concentration on the essential we arrive at our dance forms.<sup>31</sup>

When Sigurd Leeder decided to found his own school in London in 1947, he developed a method of dance training, which focused on the individual personality and expression of the dancer, whom he sought to raise as a self-assured artist. The experience of movement was still at the center of his teachings ("Die Lebendigkeit einer Bewegung gibt dieser Leuchtkraft, nicht die Korrektheit der Ausführung." / "The vivacity of movement makes it shine, not the correctness of execution."), yet colors (he had been known for his excellent stage decors and drawings), form, music and rhythm were considered of equal importance.

The lessons at the Leeder School consisted of dance technique, choreutics and eukinetics. As Baxter recalls her own education there, it focused on the parameters of "force, space and time" as well as "dance notation, devised by Laban; technique of dance; choreutics, the study of the use of space; eukinetics, the study of the quality of movement; and dance composition" (1970: 299). For her, Leeder training "enabled the

---

31 Translation by the author.

student to begin to see the world of movement in a new light" (1970: 299). Leeder's focus on movement as expression of self-identity was indeed an inspiration to many of his pupils. As Erika Ackermann has pointed out, Leeder's "harmony-teaching" ("Harmonielehre") freed and encouraged his students to look for their own way of movement and its appropriate form. Thus, he helped and encouraged his dancers to find and express their individual self through the medium of dance (Müller 2001: 10).

Leeder's interest in elaborate dance theatre started early through the influence of his deaf-mute play-mate Anna with whom he had discovered a secret code of danced expression. Since music was unimportant to the girl, Leeder made an effort in designing marvelous costume, gesture and mime to entertain his friend. He explains how this early beginning came to influence his later art:

Von diesem Spiel geblieben ist mir die Freude an der Bewegung und der Drang zum Theatrespielen, Werke zu schaffen, die Träger meiner inneren Gesichter sind und sie artgerecht einzukleiden. Unser Spiel bedurfte keiner Geldmittel und die späteren ernsteren Spiele hatten meistens nur sehr beschränkte Mittel zur Verfügung, und gerade die Einschränkung hat mich immer wieder angespornt und meine Fantasie zu immer neuen Mitteln greifen lassen, um schöne Wirkung aus dem fast Nichts zu erzielen. Ich weiß, dass meine Schüler aus den armen Ländern ganz besonders von dieser technischen Seite, die neben der tänzerischen Arbeit durch Beispiele gelehrt wurde, viel Anregung mit nach Hause nahmen (in: Müller 2001: 11).

What remained from this game is the joy of movement and the urge to play theatre, create works which bear my inner faces and to dress them properly. Our play did not need money and the later plays did often times only have very limited financial support; and precisely this limitation challenged my imagination time and again to make use of ever new means to achieve beautiful impression from almost nothing. I know that my pupils from the poorer countries took home many ideas particularly from this technical side, which was taught by examples beside the dance work.<sup>32</sup>

Leeder's notion of a "poor dance theatre" so to speak could easily be adopted by the Jamaican dance theatre movement on Baxter's return.

Seeing "movement in a new light" then, Baxter was prepared to reassess her country's rich kinaesthetic repertoire in terms of a visionary

---

32 Translation by the author.

form of Jamaican dance theatre. The mission statement of her company proclaimed to “widen the knowledge and experience of its members in dance” by developing an “idiom which would suitably and adequately give artistic expression, in keeping with life and culture of the Caribbean” (Baxter 1970: 305). Collaboration with other Caribbean dance companies, regular training, research and investigation as well as dance theatre productions were also part of that agenda. While Baxter’s solid training in modern dance formed the base of her approach, it was, however, for the Jamaican folklore to refine her emerging technique. Baxter explains:

[...] the visits paid to the countryside of Jamaica in company with the early Social Welfare Officers to see and judge folk dances of Jamaica, which were being resuscitated and encouraged, contributed to my attempts to portray the spirit of Jamaica in dance. [...] I was destined to begin by creating dances and letting the research come afterwards. [...] had I known then, as I now know, the extent and depth of Jamaican folklore, I might have been afraid to start. [...] When I began, I asked of many people and was told that there were no Jamaican dances, no, not one, just a little “shay, shay” and “bram” on a Saturday night. At that time, in the mid 1940s, I had not seen Pocomania, which is now the most viewed of all the branches of religious dance. I had seen quadrille once or twice. How well do I remember coming upon the Cumina music, for the first time. Moore was doing research on African survivals in the parish of St. Thomas and as he and his colleague and I listened to the playback of tapes, I could not believe that this was Jamaican music. I was sure that he was playing material gathered in Africa. I could not catch the words – the dialect was too rapid; I could not sort out the drum beat, it was too complicated; the tunes were entirely unfamiliar. When I was actually taken to watch the Cumina memorial ceremony from eight o’clock one night to six the next morning, then my real Jamaican eyes were opened (1970: 298).

In her creative dances, Ivy Baxter brought Jamaican folk culture to the urban middle class that under colonialism had lost any meaningful connection with this part of their African history and heritage. The Baxter Company’s repertoire consisted thus of three types of dances: 1. “arranged and reconstructed folk dances of Jamaica and the West Indies”, 2. “creative and dramatic ballets based on folk tunes” and 3. “dance compositions general in theme” (Baxter 1970: 308).

The company performed at national and civic occasions, at shows for the Ministry of Education as well as at festivals, and later independence shows and at the National Stadium in front of “royalty and distin-

guished guests" (Baxter 1970: 309). Just as Baxter's eyes had been opened, she was to open those of the middle class and future generations of Jamaicans to come. The distance between city and rural lifestyle was enormous in terms of a lack of mutual understanding. When Baxter first presented her shows to Kingston town audiences, her company was met with "ridicule, distaste, and sometimes fear," because of the prevalent depreciation of folklore as low culture superstition (Baxter 1970: 298). To further and enhance the understanding and appreciation of Jamaican roots culture as significant part of the new national consciousness became therefore one of the primary tasks of Baxter's dance theatre company.

Baxter's innovative approach in creative dance enhanced the emergence of Jamaica's new public image of the time, when folk items were all of a sudden no longer limited to the secluded countryside, but became increasingly apparent in official state presentations. Baxter, for example, recalls the 1953 Military Tattoo in Kingston:

The Tattoo of 1953 formally admitted Jamaican folklore as part of the acceptable material for display to the public of Jamaica as a whole, in a government and military financed venture, to mark an official occasion. Before that, civic celebrations were characterized by sedate and patriotic songs by school children and by military displays. Burnett Webster, actor and designer, produced this section of the program with Ranny Williams, folklorist, who brought revival cult people from the West End of Kingston to lead the folk singing. Dance was supplied by the Ivy Baxter Dance Group, performing a dance, "Fishing by Night," depicting the scene of men with torches catching crayfish by the river. Original music for this dance was by Oswald Russell, a brilliant Jamaican performer and composer. Costumes and properties, designed by Burnett Webster, were colorful and distinctive. The motif of the decor was 18<sup>th</sup> century Jamaican with enormous multicoloured umbrellas as the main stage properties. This was followed by a folklore presentation by the Ivy Baxter Dance Group for the visit of the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh at King's House (1970: 104-105).

Obviously, by the mid 1950s Jamaica was prepared for the political change that the arts movement had successfully been launching into. By displaying Jamaican grassroots culture, a powerful statement of cultural independence was made that even in the presence of the British Queen and Duke was meant to tell of an African tradition standing strong and ready to take over.

Remembered today as the “quiet advocate of identification and integration,” Baxter’s significance for Jamaican dance theatre cannot be underestimated (Mock Yen 2001: 7). Through her international travels – she had been to schools in London, New York and Toronto – Baxter soon came to realize the importance of a Pan-Caribbean interconnectedness. More importantly, she also learned that while in Jamaica she had been a privileged member of the middle class, she was elsewhere simply perceived as “a black woman from the Caribbean – not apricot – not cinnamon, but Black,” which then made her “open to issues of identity for native Jamaicans, and integration in terms of the Caribbean” (Mock Yen 2001: 9). By bringing Jamaican “history to life”, Baxter’s dance company not only provided the ground for meaningful self-expression, but she also managed through her dances to empower a whole society (Mock Yen 2001: 20; 14). It was thanks to her influence that the Jamaican education agenda was redefined and that, later on, dance and music became promoted as developmental tools. Dance in primary education was thus to nurture a deeper self-respect among Jamaican children, who via their own drums and dances should learn to truly connect to their ancestral heritage as well as apprehend such key skills as “collaboration, good timing, and commitment” (Mock Yen 2001: 17).

Baxter’s dance compositions outlined what should in the following generation develop into the Jamaican dance theatre aesthetic. Mock Yen recalls four of her works as being “narrative in construct”: 1. *Passing Parade*, 2. *Rat Passage* (1954), 3. *Village Scene*, and 4. *Pocomania* (Mock Yen 2001: 20-21). While the first explored the movement of everyday life and bustle on King Street, the second dealt with the more political issue of increased economic migration to England in the 1930s. The third and the fourth dance piece experimented more directly with Baxter’s assembled folk material. As Mock Yen describes:

“Village Scene” was an enactment of how the folk laboured, loved and passed their leisure. Ivy herself danced the poignant role of a Mother near breaking point, burdened by child bearing and rearing within parameters of deprivation. [...] Pocomania, a ritualistic state of becoming a ‘little mad’. We laughed at the idea of spirit possession until we who had mastered Leeder and other recognized dance techniques, succumbed to the hypnotic rhythm of the Frats Quintet singing and chanting from deep in their souls to the accompaniment and ancestral hegemony of the drums (2001: 21).



Ivy Baxter, rpt. in *Sun over the West Indies* by The Jamaica Company of Dancers and Singers, Howard University Intercultural Exchange, Performance Program 1961.

Baxter's choreography, furthermore, made use of simple props that derived from her knowledge of Jamaican grassroots culture: scarves and cutlass, for example, came to represent the female/male principle, while the circle and line divided movement into progression and continuity (Mock Yen 2001: 22). However, ballet was not entirely abandoned, but maintained as a worth wile technical exercise. Members of the Baxter Group were therefore also sent to attend Madame Soohi's local Ballet School (Baxter 1970: 294).

Perceived as "the vital force" to Jamaica's local dance scene, Baxter's talent and inspiration, hence, produced the cradle of Jamaica's upcoming dance theatre success. Invited to Howard University's 1961 Spring Festival, many of Baxter's former acolytes joined forces in presenting a full scale performance of Jamaican folk dance, lore and song under the common denominator of *The Jamaica Company of Dancers and Singers*. The program *Sun Over the West Indies* consisted of altogether thirteen performance acts, which presented the peak of Jamaica's talent in the performing arts at the time. In fact, many of these performers presented the core of artists to join forces in the founding of Jamaica's

National Dance Theatre Company the following year.<sup>33</sup> Presented were original music compositions by Mapletoft Poulle & Orchestra as well as the Frats Quintett, choreography by Ivy Baxter, Rex Nettleford, and Eddy Thomas, as well as folk tales narrated by the famous Miss Lou, alias Louise Bennett. While Baxter's own company continued up until 1967, her off-spring Eddy Thomas, Rex Nettleford, Alma Mock Yen and Joyce Campbell soon were to start their own creative dance companies. In this respect, Baxter and her later disciples should continuously pursue McBurnie's pioneering effort in their own Jamaican ways (Mock Yen 2001: 27).

## From Sacred to Secular: The Institutionalization of Jamaican Dance Theatre

### Re-inventing African Caribbean Ritual through Modern Dance

The body or corporeal images provide an insight into the psychic condition of the enslaved individual. The body – like the mind in the world of the slave – is numbed, impotent, inert, ultimately someone else's possession. Consequently, self-assertion is inevitably linked to a sensuous physical presence, to an active body, a standing 'upright and free,' in the words of Césaire's *Cahier*. Freedom for the enslaved is seen in terms of unrestricted physical movement (Glissant 1989: 8).

As has been shown in the preceding chapter, Beryl McBurnie and Ivy Baxter pioneered the Caribbean dance movement. Yet, in fact, the two had already met before McBurnie's visit to Jamaica at the first Caribbean Arts Festival (Carifesta) in Puerto Rico 1952 (Baxter 1970: 301). Organized by American dance scholar Lisa Lekis this event brought together performing groups from all over the Caribbean islands and had an enormous effect on the region's self-perception (see Lekis 1960).<sup>34</sup> For the first time, people came to realize their cultural commonality, despite the different colonial administrations. In retrospect, the festival

33 Compare *Sun Over the West Indies* by the Jamaica Company of Dancers and Singers, dir. by Noel Vaz and Rex Nettleford, Howard University Intercultural Exchange Program 1961.

34 Lekis accounts for several of the Caribbean dance forms she encountered during her research for the festival, yet from today's perspective her ethnographic/dance aesthetic insight into the individual dance traditions appears somewhat limited.

had marked the point of departure for an awakening of Caribbean consciousness in the entire region. Through eye-to-eye contact between the otherwise isolated island populations, dance and music performances easily overcame the colonial language divide in terms of a shared performance heritage that had successfully resisted and survived imperial oppression (Baxter 1970: 302). Astounded by the artistry of Geoffrey Holder and McBurnie's *Little Carib* Dance Company, the impact of Haiti's Théâtre Folk-Lorique came across as particularly remarkable. As Baxter recalls: "These dancers were the first of their kind that any of us from Jamaica had ever seen. They re-enacted the ceremonies of Damballa, the snake god, complete with candles, fire, and smoke to the stimulation of the terrific drumming of Tiroro, Haiti's virtuoso drummer. Tiroro became a particular friend of the Jamaicans, and it is from him that the art of drum-making revived in Jamaica" (1970: 303-304).

Also Geoffrey Holder admired Haiti's connectedness to the African ancestor pantheon and found the Haitian heritage extremely inspirational, when compared to his home island Trinidad, where "the gods had gone because the English had killed them off" (Dunning 2001: 34). Haiti's proud tradition of being the first independent black republic outside Africa since 1804 lend energy and impetus to spur other Caribbean islands in their emancipatory arts projects (see James 1938). The discovery of the rich variety of African Caribbean folk forms thus shaped the development of modern dance in the region, when pioneers of the Caribbean's dance theatre movement started to develop their own dance techniques.

Assembling and exchanging Caribbean dance vocabulary from the islands' folkloric heritage, McBurnie and Baxter blended religious ritual with their training in modern dance. Similar to McBurnie's *Shango*, Baxter's *Pocomania* was the first Jamaican choreography to experiment with such movement vocabulary. As the dancers appropriated the ritualistic steps, Baxter, however, soon realized the need to abstract and find an artistic filter to capture the essence, yet not to perform the ritual proper in order to avoid spiritual possession on stage. She recalls that experience from her company's Puerto Rican performance:

*Pocomania* was based on the rhythm and ritual of the same name, and was accompanied by the Frats Quintet. In this dance, it was originally planned to have the drums stop just before the time of 'possession,' which took place in silence, just as it had taken place in the meeting which I had watched. I had never danced in this number in its entirety. However, I discovered that the

same effect was produced in the dancers as took place in the real worshippers. This was not revealed until a year or so later. Many of the dancers said 'I felt light. I felt as if my head was growing, but I was ashamed to tell you.' Since then this dance has never been performed as it was in Puerto Rico. The ending was changed to prevent this happening; and, thereafter, *Pocomania* was never rehearsed 'fullout' (1970: 302).

Working with ritual movements became particularly significant, because the theatre dance innovation coincided with the Trinidadian and Jamaican quest for postcolonial self-definition. Sharing similar cultural performances, audience members from different islands were knit together by their common kinaesthetic response to the African-derived rhythms and movement patterns. Expressing one's cultural sensibility via dance thus became a powerful articulation of self-identity that directly communicated to Caribbean audiences.

In her book *Golden Heritage: The Dance in Trinidad and Tobago*, Molly Ahye describes this kinaesthetic appeal of Caribbean dance, which addresses mind and feelings as well as dimensions of spirituality (1978: 17). She furthermore characterizes Caribbean dance theatre as mimetic, because of the kinaesthetic survival of distinct cultural practices, often derived from folk festivals and religious ritual. Caribbean dance thus conveys joy, sorrow, anger, frustration, yet it can also "boost one's morale" as in former pre-/war, -hunting, or initiation context. Also, distinct dances may serve as prayer, supplication and atonement in awe of a Supreme Being. Lastly, many dances will symbolize the veneration of certain life forms, that is, for example, birds and animals; as well as introduce ancestor worship (for example the Big Drum Nation Dances) and the celebration of life, birth, death, and rites of passage (Ahye 1978: 17).

These teachings, while they are to some extent reminiscent of those to be found in modern dance, do, however, primarily rely on the religious foundation of African Caribbean movement patterns. Through the process of artistic abstraction, the sacredness of ritual dance is transferred into staged symbols and metaphors.<sup>35</sup> Ramiro Guerra has described this process for the Cuban context by distinguishing four stages of the theatricalization of folklore. In the first state, folk art

35 Joan H. Burroughs in her discussion of Jean-Léon Destiné's staged versions of Haitian Yanvalou introduces the distinction between ritually-derived body postures as "symbolic movement" and staged renderings of possession as "movement metaphor" (1995: 230-241).

serves ritual, recreational and social functions and is primarily utilitarian as, for example, in ceremonial worship and communication with certain deities. Unlike theatrical spectacle, folk art is a processual and vivid form of pleasing the gods. Only in the second stage is this material apprehended mostly in terms of its formal aspects. The musical, dance, literary, and plastic values now lose their original meaning as they are projected towards the new cultural epoch of folk revival. Guerra considers this stage as directly related to the national project, which finds its new identity on these traditional forms. However, in their revived form, these creations have become an entirely independent interpretation of the former folk retention. Following this interpretative revival, the third stage works on the stylization of the folk material, which is profoundly investigated and manipulated so as to develop a theatrical technique. Folk material is now arranged in terms of symmetry/a-symmetry, exposition/development/end, suites, narrative, theme and variation. Lastly, the fourth step can be called the original artistic creation, because – inspired by the national folk material – this innovative form has found and developed its unique style and expression (Guerra 1989: 6-15).

What differentiates Caribbean modern dance theatre thus from its modern progenitors in the U.S. and Europe, is precisely its shared African Creole background in such religious rituals as Vodou, Shango and Revival/Myal. Dance scholars Robert Farris Thompson, Kariamu Welsh-Asante and Brenda Dixon-Gottschild have argued to regard such continuity of religious practice as the foundational source of a common African aesthetic in the New World diaspora (see Thompson 1974; Welsh-Asante 2001; Dixon-Gottschild 1998). Not only do these expressions share certain formal aspects, but they also convey common ethical values and philosophy (Dagel 1999: 7-8). Robert Farris Thompson in his seminal essay “An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance” (1966) first pointed out the following five key elements to be found: 1. “a philosophy of the cool”/“patience and collectedness of mind”, 2. “dominance of a percussive concept of performance”, 3. “West African dances are *talking dances*,” 4. “call-and-response,” 5. “moral function of the songs of allusion and the dances of derision” (in: Dagel 1999: 72-86). Melville Herskovits’ earlier research in African American studies furthermore distinguished four different types of African retention in the New World: 1. survivals, 2. syncretisms, 3. reinterpretations, and 4. cultural “imponderables” – of which “values and automatic motor patterns” constitute the majority (in: Smith 1965: 25;

35). Of particular interest to the adaptation process of African retention in Caribbean dance theatre is particularly the third, since the notion of “reinterpretation” adheres to the corresponding value of an African aesthetic maintained even in the abstract alteration of the folk/modern blend. Modern dance thus appeared as a particularly fluctuating format which allowed for cultural permeation by African aesthetic traits, which, as will be argued here, proved so highly intriguing to convey the Caribbean’s emancipatory project.

Helen Thomas’ sociological reading of early American Modern Dance has already pointed out that the form was primarily regarded as an expression of American individualism and non-conformism (see Thomas 1995). The Denishawn School, out of which emerged modern dance giants Martha Graham and Charles Weidman, emphasized the student’s natural talents and power of movement, thus allowing for “diversity and individuality of form” (Thomas 1995: 85). Following this aesthetic policy, modern dance mirrored its particular social environment as it derived from the life and circumstance of its immediate time and space. Its prime function was to communicate and relate to the dancers’ contemporary experience. Thomas furthermore argues that the emergence of Graham and Weidman was directly related to the impact of the Great Depression and the Jazz Era. Similar to Africanist dance forms, Graham technique was solidly grounded in the earth as expressed in her floor work. She, too, would start from life experience and work through inner emotion to create dance works that would make people think. How much of Graham and other modern dance work had been – consciously or not – influenced by the African Caribbean presence though? In other words, did McBurnie’s contribution of Caribbean folk elements add to the development of Graham and Weidman as much as they had influenced her?<sup>36</sup>

As Peter H. Wood hypothesized on the origin of ‘primitivist’ movement in early modern dance, it might have owed “more than it yet realizes to roots which are black, and southern, and ultimately African” (1988: 8). Bent knees, thrusting hips and pointed elbows were only the more explicit signifiers of that cultural turn, which was in fact “moving closer to the continent of Africa in body movement all the time” (Wood 1988: 8). John O. Perpener, furthermore, characterizes the “New Dance” of the 1930s as: “An artform that was individually expressive, unfet-

36 While the influence of Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham’s work has been recently acknowledged, McBurnie’s impact appears still somewhat neglected.

tered by prior constraints, and unafraid to comment upon the emotional, psychological, and political concerns of contemporary America [...]” (Perpener 1992: 12-13). Consequently, while modern dance training was not as accessible to African American performers as it should ideally have been, it could not be completely kept from them either. As Perpener claims: “The effect of the sight and the spirit of the new dance could not be closed off as easily as a studio door” (1992: 12-13).

Certainly, the 1930s were not only the time of the Great Depression, high modernism and social upheaval, but also the Harlem Renaissance. This New York based black arts movement was in full swing at the time, propagating a concept of activist art that aimed at the perceptual change of African American identity in demand of full civil rights (Perpener 1992: 38). While the modern dance pioneers’ interpretations of African and oriental folk-material blended into the modernist discourse on Primitivism, one needs to keep in mind that African American and Caribbean investigations demonstrated a rather different quality as they, too, melded into the modern form. Whereas modernism’s earthbound movements were protesting against classical ballet, they still evolved from – and to some extent also remained within – that Western theatrical tradition. Caribbean dance though was earthbound from the very beginning and all that modern dance in fact achieved, was allowing these ancestral dances entrance onto the Western dominated theatre stage.

In order to gain representational access and undermine cultural hegemony then, modern dance simply presented another strategic tool to articulate African American/Caribbean identity under the guise of an accepted dance theatre tradition. Moreover, since modern dance of the early 1930s was considered a “weapon in the class struggle,” as well as a means to “fight for racial justice,” this appropriation appeared even the more successful, because revolutionary dance aesthetics matched the political goals and social concerns of the time (Thomas 1995: 107-109). For example, the New York based New Dance Group, which hosted Beryl McBurnie as well as Pearl Primus, had been founded in 1932 as part of the New Deal’s Federal Theatre Project. Unlike many other modern dance companies of the time, the New Dance Group actually provided the African American/Caribbean emancipation struggle with a public forum, which – due to its progressive policy and training of African Americans – allowed these artists entrance onto the dance theatre stage (Foulkes 2002: 164).

To conclude, Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus have repeatedly been heralded for their danced interventions towards African American empowerment. Including Beryl McBurnie and Ivy Baxter in this African American/Caribbean continuum, these women dance pioneers performed not only as beautifully 'exotic' stars – which of course they also were – but more importantly as "political activists fighting for their rightful place in American society" (Foulkes 2002: 168). In this respect, the 1930s and 40s have generally come to be regarded as years of discovery and self-assertion, when African American/Caribbean choreographers started to look into African-derived folk-traditions as material for their dance theatre expression. While this field-based quest was largely an interpretive reinvention for the stage, such performance dance still conveyed much of its social function and background as both were expressions of embodied liberation. Modern Dance was only the mask under which African identity could performatively claim its public legitimacy. As the following brief history of the institutionalization of Jamaican Dance Theatre through Festival, National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC) and the foundation of the Jamaica School of Dance will show, performance dance also became the prime instrument of Jamaica's cultural decolonization process after independence.

### **Jamaica Festival**

By the time of achieving full independence in 1962, Jamaican affiliation with the British Crown had eventually grown obsolete and the (re)invention of national culture and its unifying symbols became paramount on the nation-builders agenda. Not only in regard of the Jamaican people themselves, but also in their relation to the world, an increase in awareness of Jamaican culture became a necessity that was strongly articulated in the Jamaica Festival of 1962, the country's first Independence Celebration. Building on the endeavors of Jamaica Welfare Limited, which Norman Manley had already inaugurated in 1936, Jamaica Festival continued this adult educational organization's early effort, which "aimed to carry to the people a sense of personal ability and a sense of the value of things Jamaican" (Baxter 1970: 93). Ivy Baxter's work as dance officer, for example, was undertaken within this developmental framework.

Functioning as a cultural agent among Jamaica's rural parishes, Jamaica Welfare – which after the first free elections in 1944 became first the Jamaica Social Welfare Commission and then the Jamaican Cultural

Development Commission (JCDC) – gave an administrative frame to what had in fact been an ongoing and lively tradition of rural festivals dating back to at least as early as the turn of the twentieth century. Festival in the Jamaican context meant more than a singular event of mere diversion. As Rex Nettleford has remarked in *Caribbean Cultural Identity*:

The voluntary participation in the Jamaica Festival movement has the ring of authenticity since it reflects a long tradition of voluntary individual and community collaboration for the public good. This had formed part of the immediate post-slavery rehabilitation exercise in the setting up of Free Villages, and was later utilised through Jamaica Welfare Limited, founded by Norman Manley as a means of mobilising people around to the new national spirit in the late 1930s (2003: 94).

Moreover, as has been demonstrated already, this early mobilization of the cultural grassroots as a source of national development instigated an appreciation of folklore as anti-elitist cultural dynamic in the country's effort towards decolonization and indigenization of Jamaican cultural identity.

As also Sylvia Wynter has pointed out, festival and folk dance can be regarded as the emblem of the Caribbean's cultural self-definition. She claims that the African's survival in the face of transplantation presents "the clearest testimony to the strength and creativity of African cultures" and insists on the importance of publicly appreciating this folk heritage in the wake of Garvey's socio-political and Césaire's more aesthetically oriented Négritude movement (1970: 34). While the Eurocentric vision focussed on the exploitation of natural resources – including human beings – African slaves were caught in an ambivalence, where they would labor yet maintain a close relationship to the earth as farmers of the land. Folk culture thus evolved as "the cultural guerrilla resistance against Market economy" by asserting the slave's dignity and humanity against colonial oppression (Wynter 1970: 36). Emerging from Wynter's proposed dialectic of "plantation and plot" cultural adaptation took consequently place in form of a continuity, which transferred African festival to the Christian calendar. Jamaican society thus developed two societal superstructures: one of "Western civilization," the other of a "grassroots culture" (Wynter 1970: 36).

In line with the above argument, the conscious process of recovering the Caribbean's folk heritage has in fact emerged as a "Caribbean intellectual tradition." As Lloyd King has commented:

The theory Anglophone-Caribbean style is often implicit but certain strands can easily be picked out. If the Revolution did not materialize, one core of possibility had endured. This is what comes to be called the folk, an almost mythical entity in whom a psychodynamics of integrated selfhood survived. The folk stand for all that eluded the corruption of a totalitarian Westernization and the constitution of the folk in an elaborated discursive mode has been one of the accomplishments of the Caribbean intellectual tradition (1996: 11).

By investigating the music and dance of the rural communities, Jamaica's political elite brought the African folk heritage to the forefront of the national consciousness. From the 1962 independence celebration onwards, Jamaica Festival became institutionalized as an annual event. Also, a festival department under the Ministry of Development and Welfare was founded to administratively support its organization, headed by Edward Seaga (Baxter 1970: 106). His idea was to establish festival as a permanent institution to set up "a national stage where Jamaicans from all walks of life would have the opportunity to create their own brand of artistic expression, reflecting their life history and life styles" (in: Sherlock/Bennett 1998: 406). From 1964 until 1974 Michael Manley pursued this cultural development plan further by promoting "cultural growth as an instrument of development policy" in the nation's decolonization process (Nettleford 2003: 68-69). In fact, Jamaica Festival not only nourished such exposure, but also bridged the class division between the social lower and middle strata of society. By publicly appreciating Jamaican "roots culture," imperialist Western distinctions between high and low cultural standards were slowly eroded (Nettleford 2003: 45-46). Nettleford delineates the influence of the folk complex on the cultural process of nation building as follows:

To conceive it [the cultural process] as a manifestation of fragmented segments known as 'high art' and 'folk art' is to perpetuate some of the worst elements of Plantation society where elitist Eurocentrism lords over the collective consciousness of the African-folk and where the Great House stands in contempt of the village plot. Better if the cultural process were seen as a growth process with the source of life beginning in the roots to grow again in a never-ending regenerative process. [...] This on-going re-cycling of effort is

the dynamic of the cultural process and has no place for elitism as it is understood in a class-ridden and status-conscious society. [...] It is for cultural development policies then, to bring to the people not only an understanding of the power and necessity of the roots but also a full grasp of their responsibility to nurture those roots so that they can bear fruits to enrich the quality of life through replanting and reproduction (2003: 51).

To conclude, Jamaica festival today integrates several of the island's folk expressions such as local cuisine, fashion, drama, music, dance, and arts/crafts. It still operates largely on the involvement of volunteer engagement, understood as "service to the community" – a concept that has become highly significant for Jamaican cultural development in general, because it institutionalized the revolutionary claim to the African Jamaican folk heritage as legitimate part of the new national identity (Nettleford 2003: 92-93).

### **Jamaican Cultural Development Commission (JCDC)**

Founded by later NDTC member Joyce Campbell, Jamaica's Cultural Development Commission was inaugurated in the early 1960s. An early acolyte of Ivy Baxter, Campbell received her formal dance training under Ivy Baxter in 1951, when she was elected first officer of the Jamaican Festival Commission in 1961. In that position Campbell was responsible for the promotion of folk and traditional dance and its appreciation among the Jamaican people (see Bowen 1980). In the wake of Ivy Baxter's pioneering work, Campbell considered her early field work as the decisive moment for her personal development in dance. She recalls:

I worked for three years before going into the JCDC as dance officer with the Social Development Commission, which had used dance on a community development basis. I was exposed to these traditional folk forms from those early days on, yes. [...] It was finding yourself. For me it was getting to know my country, getting to know my people. [...] So I found my way around the countryside. I learnt about the people. It was an eye-opener, a realization of who I was, what I was, what my country was all about.<sup>37</sup>

Through her work as dance officer Campbell further developed the traditional dance forms – which her work first of all sought to preserve

---

37 Interview with Joyce Campbell 15 Aug. 2003.

as best possible – from their religious and recreational background into a theatre art form. Campbell had taken part in the Caribbean Festival of Arts in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1952 and Trinidad in 1958 on occasion of the West Indies Federation. She also was among the core members of the later NDTC, who had been invited as *Jamaican Company of Dancers* to Howard University, Washington, D.C. in 1961. In 1978 she furthermore conducted in-depth research with the National Folk Dance Company in Ghana.

The Jamaican Festival continued under the auspices of the JCDC as the conscious effort to bring folk dance to the national level. The JCDC's Jamaican Festival Dance Competition thus started a cultural movement to promote this new self-awareness and development of Jamaican society at the end of colonial rule. Through the festival, dance – which beforehand had been either mere recreation or was restricted to the very few, who had access to ballet or modern dance classes – became widely known and appreciated not only for entertainment, but increasingly for its instruction of discipline, creativity and self-esteem in the communities. The festival helped to identify and delineate the traditional dances, which since 1970 became included in the school curriculum. While dance had always been an island-wide part of Jamaican life, the traditional dances were originally confined to Jamaica's rural areas and differed from parish to parish. Yet, with the arrival of the JCDC's adjudicators in the regional communities, these dances were increasingly exposed to a wider and after forty years nation-wide populace.

Most of the traditional dances were created from those African retentions which date back to the times of slavery. Among the most renowned of these dances are: Queens Party Bruckins, Quadrille, Gumbay, Nago Burro, Gerreh, Tambu, Dinki Mini, Maypole, Jonkonnu, Kumina, Myal, Revival, Poco, and Ring Games. Festival recovered those dances not only to Jamaica's public consciousness, but also from virtual extinction at times. Hence, what was once regarded as marginal came to the forefront of public acknowledgement and awareness. Ultimately, it was through the JCDC and festival that most people actually started to develop a certain pride and feeling for the dignity offered by their African heritage, which for so long had been suppressed under slavery and colonial rule. As Sherlock and Bennett have expressed, "folklore is the living memorial which the people fashioned as their answer to the castles and ruins, their source of healing, recognition of each other as shipmates on the long voyage to nationhood" (1998: 199).

Jamaican folklore as “living memorial” and “source of healing” was thus nourished and kept alive through the new nation’s administrative frame. However, also in the development of the creative arts, folklore should become more and more important as the foundation of Jamaica’s National Dance Theatre in the same year as independence demonstrates.

### **The National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC) of Jamaica**

To found a national dance theatre company appeared as the logical consequence of Norman and Edna Manley’s cultural policy since the 1930s, which had successfully promoted the integration of Jamaican grassroots culture. As has been shown, festival, folk dance, and musical traditions appeared to best represent that cultural shift. Also, Jamaica’s Little Theatre Movement (LTM), which Greta and Henry Fowler had founded in 1941, achieved much in terms of such theatrical rehearsal of Jamaican independence. Developing the English Pantomime as a creolized Jamaican genre, Jamaica’s acclaimed performer-comedians Louise Bennet, Ranny Williams, and Noel Vaz, first based their sketches on local color, political, and social satire. The genre became highly popular during the 1950s independence movement, when it was celebrated as the country’s “genuine folk theatre” (Gloudon 1982: 64). The LTM’s pioneering work is important in the dance theatre context, because – apart from organizing school drama festivals – it also offered assistance to emerging artistic talent. Jamaica’s annual pantomime served as the country’s major artistic training ground not only for actors, but also for upcoming dancers, singers, musicians, choreographers, and stage-designers. Traditionally premiering each Boxing Day, Jamaica Pantomime still attracts thousands of Jamaicans each year and its theatricality has influenced the NDTC’s evolving dance theatre aesthetic as much as Jamaican playwrights Dennis Scott and Trevor Rhone.

The link between the Jamaican Cultural Development Commission, Festival, Pantomime and dance theatre was further pursued in the foundation of Jamaica’s National Dance Theatre Company under Rex Nettleford and Eddy Thomas, who had both been former dancers with Ivy Baxter’s Dance Group. As Sheila Barnett, dance scholar and long time NDTC member has expressed: NDTC members were first of all “a group of citizens committed to nationhood and the development of the cultural expression of their society” (Barnett 1982: 81). Founded in the wake of Jamaica’s independence celebrations of 1962, the company’s

'birth' date carried particular significance for the NDTC's artistic mission. As Rex Nettleford, co-founder and today's artistic director has expressed, the company's work addressed "questions of identity, of national self-respect, of new nationhood, [and] of freedom" (Nettleford 1969: 29). Touring Canada that same year, the NDTC soon became the young nation's cultural ambassador, just like McBurnie's *Little Carib* Company before them. As Edward Seaga's address to the Stratford Festival audience of 1963 suggests, Jamaican dance theatre was envisioned as the new nation's most beloved representative. He proclaimed:

Jamaica, now in her second year of Independent Nationhood welcomes any opportunity that she may be given to project to the world what have been her achievements, cultural or economic, and what are her dreams and aspirations for the future. The performing arts are an excellent vehicle through which a country can, by the medium of entertainment, present an image to the onlooker through the showcase of dance and song.<sup>38</sup>

Considering the complex colonial heritage, this national task was of course hardly an easy one to fulfill. In their mutual effort to build a uniquely Jamaican dance theatre aesthetic, Rex Nettleford and Eddy Thomas sought to combine the literal with the abstract in order to create a dance technique that should correspond their Jamaican based choreographic theme (Nettleford 1969: 35). As Nettleford has stated in an early interview with *Dance and Dancers* in 1965, their exploration was at first concerned

[w]ith emphasis on training, with emphasis on the exploration of movement for movement's sake, with emphasis on research into the movement patterns of the people in the Caribbean area. To find out if there was some system or a way of moving that could be developed into an art form. Mind you, all of us were exposed to the established dance techniques – classical ballet, modern dance techniques from the United States, from the Sigurd Leeder School, the old free style dance. So it was a question of how to apply these techniques in terms of West Indian movement patterns (1965: 20).

Through Ivy Baxter's pioneering work, the NDTC's more classical link of the first five years was established, while Eddy Thomas – who had been on a modern dance scholarship at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in New York – experimented with modern dance

---

38 NDTC Stratford Festival Programme, 1963.

technique. Beryl McBurnie as well as Lavinia Williams-Yarborough introduced Haitian folk forms to NDTC members, who had received various training in modern dance beforehand. Sheila Barnett, for example, joined with a background in Laban technique from the Chelsea School of Physical Education in England.<sup>39</sup> And Eryck Darby, who was also influential on the company's early work, had been a student at Jacob's Pillow in the U.S. (Nettleford 1969: 31).

Even though company director Rex Nettleford stresses the importance of modern dance technique and training for the beginning years, his own approach to choreography, varied from others in that he believed that "each dance does create its own technique" (1969: 31). Especially for a company in search of its own style, he argued that a balance between vitality and control should be kept in order not to "slavishly copy" but rather "find expression in [one's] own terms" (Nettleford 1969: 32). Certainly, ten years after Ivy Baxter Dance Group, the vocabulary had already been successfully expanded. As Nettleford explained:

We have the advantage of being able to refer to the vocabulary of many different techniques with a view to developing a style of our own. For whether we like it or not we are an amalgam of different techniques with a view to developing a style of our own. For whether we like it or not we are an amalgam of different cultural strains which are yet to find the coherence and distinctiveness that can be expressed in any precise terms (1968: 130).

On behalf of such further development of "distinctiveness," Nettleford held on to ballet and modern dance as "essentials" which could not easily be ignored, since he believes that they are somewhat common to all theatre dancing by "stretching across the geographical boundaries and defying racial barriers" (Nettleford 1969: 32). In this respect, the NDTC's aesthetic policy opposed the simplistic definitions of 'ethnic dance' or 'exoticism' prevalent during those formative years. More importantly, the company strove for what Nettleford calls "conscious transition," i.e. the development of a distinct Jamaican approach that emerges from experimentation with ballet, modern dance and folk movement vocabulary to create an authentic Jamaican style. Nettleford remarks:

---

39 NDTC Stratford Festival Programme, 1963.

As a teacher my own approach to training has been by way of discovering for oneself and bending some of the fundamentals of established techniques to the needs of the Jamaican dancers, never underestimating the necessity of a well-tuned instrument or of such technical proficiencies as strength, kinesthetic awareness, coordination and flexibility. But I am at the same time ever conscious of the stifling effect that exaggerated emphasis on technique can have for the work the NDTC sets itself. In a sense each dance does create its own technique, making the search endless and the creative spirit self-generating. My classes are therefore approached with this in mind, in a commitment to a judicious balance between maintaining natural vitality and imposing indispensable control. The breaking down of choreographic statements into their component parts is itself an important source of technique-building and this exercise I have regarded as essential for a company that seeks to find its own expression in its own terms (1969: 32).

Observing an NDTC class today, almost about forty years later, the western trained eye might still be tempted to recognize the modern floor work and the ballet barre first, rather than noticing the actual Jamaican input of the training. However, this impression of a very familiar studio atmosphere is misleading, and very soon creatively counter-acted. The changing pattern starts with the dynamics of the NDTC's live drumming, which is immediately responded to, when the dancers exercise a variety of Caribbean movements. Caribbean dance vocabulary also dominates the progressions, which usually makes up the latter half of the class. Clearly, the drum's pounding "heart"-beat rhythm calls for a different body response than that of a softly played piano would.<sup>40</sup> Posture, breathing and energy release are immediately affected, because to most drumming, be it sacred or secular, there is that "dimensional" quality, which Welsh-Asante has described as characteristic trait of the African aesthetic in dance (2001: 144-151).

Since drumming in the African context traditionally served as the prime means of communication among the village members, as well as with the ancestors and gods, the presence of the singers, drums, and drummers on the Jamaican dance theatre stage establishes a cultural link from that ancestral past to the postcolonial present. In particular the use of ritual drums and rhythms such as are used in Kumina and

---

40 I owe this expression to students at Edna Manley College, who first introduced me to Jamaican rhythmic patterns, when I was looking for the NDTC class. Not knowing the directions, I was simply told to follow my heartbeat, i.e. the calling of the drums.

Revival, evoke immediate kinaesthetic response not only on behalf of the dancers, but also with local audience members.<sup>41</sup> In terms of the NDTC's use of Jamaican music, the influence of the African derived drum is therefore essential. However, much of the music which is considered suitable for dance will of course also owe to Jamaica's European classical tradition. While a staged NDTC program will usually contain canned as well as live orchestra music, most pieces will still be supported by the NDTC's drummers and singers, who form an integral part of the Company's Caribbean total theatre aesthetic.<sup>42</sup>

On behalf of the NDTC's vocabulary, Hilary S. Carty's analysis of Jamaican folk dances sums up several characteristic features of what she has defined as "Jamaican technique" (see Carty 1988). She distinguishes the following set of movement patterns:

1. earth bound movement and a low center of gravity
2. usually flat feet
3. flexed foot
4. pelvis-centered movement which allows hips and pelvis to swing independently
5. bent arms and elbows which are typical of the African-derived broken line in Caribbean dance technique
6. "cool" facial expression, body gestures are expressive only
7. isolations of shoulders, pelvis, feet, hands
8. polyrhythms deriving from African dance (1988: 88-89).

In addition, Barnett points out that a distinctly Jamaican body of dance vocabulary originated from the Festival competitions. Renowned moves, such as for example the "congo" or "pivot" step, which changes the weight sideways from one foot to the other, as well as dynamic turns and spiraling from one level to the other and the torso centered

---

41 Mervyn Morris, for example, commented in a private conversation that Kumina drumming will affect him, even though he is not a Kumina practitioner himself.

42 Because of my own scholarly constraints – which regrettably lack the sufficient music education necessary here – this analysis can unfortunately not pay the due analytic respect to Marjorie Whylie's, the NDTC singers', and drummers' decisive contribution to the NDTC's dance theatre. However, it goes without saying that certainly their original music and song compositions form an integral and not to be neglected part of the Company's overall artistic vision.

thrust are all part of the Festival style. These patterns are both linear and circular. Barnett explains:

The Festival style is shaped by the particular use of the flat foot, the lax extension of the ankle, the relaxed flexed use of arms and feet, the ripple of the back, the use of hips and the use of groups which identify form. Teachers and community workers manipulate groups so the emphasis is on group patterns and a melting, fading, reappearing of dancers on entrances and exits and the quickly paced finale or picturesque tableau (1982: 85).

She also comments on the development of the so called “creative folk dances” which are based on material from the folk tradition, yet transferred to another level. As these dances are no longer in their original setting, they assume more of a metaphorical meaning, yet do also bear traces which will derive from the folk origin. Barnett argues to regard these as a sort of readjustment of the folk dances to the needs of today’s urban people who do not necessarily share the needs of the generations past, yet partake in the common heritage (1982: 86).

Finally, up to the present day, the NDTC has continued to operate as an independent organization of voluntary engagement. Among the company’s major objectives are the following: (1) “to provide a vehicle for well trained and talented dancers,” (2) “to help widen an informed and critical Jamaican audience,” (3) “to experiment with dance-forms and techniques of all kinds with a view to helping to develop a style and form which faithfully reflect the movement of Jamaica and the Caribbean area,” and (4) “to encourage and, where possible, conduct serious research into indigenous dance-forms in Jamaica and the Caribbean area” (Nettleford 1969: 32). Relying solely on the dedication and discipline of its members who all pursue other professional careers, still nobody gets paid and performances are held for the benefit of the Jamaican community (schools, heart disease, etc.). Obviously, this concept could have worked for so long, only under the premise of what the dancing itself must give back to the individual and the larger society as can also be observed in the NDTC’s commitment to the Jamaica School of Dance.

### **The Jamaica School of Dance**

In the 1970s the combined effort of the NDTC, JCDC, the Ministry of Education and the Extra-mural Department of the University of the

West Indies promoted the training of teacher artists as educators who would be able to combine the artistic and developmental aspects of Jamaican dance theatre (Barnett 1987: 3-4). When the Jamaica School of Dance was founded by early members of the NDTC in 1970, it was first located at the Little Theatre's studio as well as at the Junior Center of the Institute of Jamaica, Half Way Tree. Training consisted of modern and folk forms, technique, and composition. Summer Workshops were also given to teachers, performers and community leaders (Barnett 1987: 4). By 1976 the School of Dance together with the School of Art, Drama, and Music became located at the Cultural Training Center. As part of the division of the Jamaica Institute, dance training was thus legitimized as an academic field with the objective that "learning, generated by the common cultural experience of Jamaicans, creates an educational link with reality" (Barnett 1987: 4). From then on Jamaican school children were consistently taught their island's own dance heritage. As Barnett describes:

Children in schools are learning about themselves, their history and culture through participation in dance programmes. Some schools offer dance as physical education and artistic expression. Children respond with body and mind to the creative and problem-solving challenges of the preparation process. Children are performing "in concert" from schools like Stella Maris and Jessie Ripoll and from studios like the Jay Teens (1963) and the Rowe-Spance Ballet Studio (1940s). A group of future artists-performers and choreographers-spectators and critics, are being disciplined through training in the dance-art (1987: 4).

As Barnett's comment shows, Jamaican dance theatre by that time had come a long way, when in fact many of the NDTC's active dancers of today are precisely recruited from the above mentioned schools and teenage companies.

### **Interlude II: Dance and the New Jamaica**

As chapter two of this book has shown for the socio-historical context of Jamaican postcolonial society, the island's population suffered from deep social division of white upper class minority, a considerably smaller brown middle, and a disenfranchised black lower class majority. Up until the late 1920s, Jamaica did in fact not mean much to its people apart from the name on the map as Sherlock and Bennett have

pointed out (Sherlock/Bennett 1998: 346). At that time, the island's African Jamaican majority had no overarching loyalties, nor collective memories or meaningful sense of community to share. Following the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion's failure onwards, Emancipation had decidedly failed to bring about the necessary political enfranchisement of the island's former slave population so that the centuries of slavery and colonial rule had left Jamaica to its own conflictuous devices. Considering the local alienation of former slaves, brown Creoles and British expatriates, there was hardly a sense of national consciousness, not to mention solidarity at that point.

Yet, as the economic pressure of the 1930s world-wide depression hit the Caribbean, it caused labour unrest which prepared the ground for socio-political change. Under the inspired leadership of Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante a new national spirit arose, which proclaimed the reinvigorating force of the black folk culture as the binding link to form a common cultural consciousness and symbolic realm for national identification. British high culture was still dominant at that time, while African survivals were debased as witchcraft and superstition. As a consequence, education and culture became the key-issue of Manley's political reform policy, which in the late 1930s called for a "new national spirit" to promote Jamaican unity through the creative arts (Nettleford 2003: 30). In hindsight, Sherlock and Bennett have described this process of nation-building as nothing short of a "miracle," when "political revolution [...] was attended by a powerful surge of creative energy that impelled Jamaicans of all classes to think of Jamaica as 'my country' and of Jamaicans of all colours as 'my people'" (Sherlock/Bennett 1998: 390). While this "surge of creative energy" was introduced in literature as well as theatre practice of the time, I will, however, argue that more importantly than that, the dance movement in fact first institutionalized these efforts through a creative appropriation of the African Jamaican folk dance heritage as promoted by its women pioneers. Jamaican dance theatre therefore publicly performed as the prime conveyor of this new attitude, which should ultimately evolve as the New Jamaica's national consciousness to be represented by the NDTC.

Jamaica's National Dance Theatre Company has thus been consciously reaching out from the national base to international acclaim. However, skipping through forty years of reviews, international critique has also oftentimes been too easily misled (Tobias 1983: 72; Williams 1972: 40; Philp 1976: 67). In fact, critics unfamiliar with the Carib-

bean cultural complex may face the immanent danger of misinterpreting Jamaican dance theatre according to their own metropolitan (post)modern/classical standards. What I wish to argue in the following section though, is that despite our shared global arts community/market, we still need to be careful not to overlook the depth and significance of each distinct dance step. Thus, I would like to suggest that NDTC choreography can only be fully appreciated, if understood on Jamaica's diverse and highly complex socio-historical and cultural background. As the company's mission of self-discovery after independence implies, one needs to consider more than mere technique and proficiency in order to investigate the meaning of the dance. The following postcolonial reading of the NDTC repertoire may consequently be conceived of as a first effort towards this challenging task.