

Coda: After the Journey – The Remains of the Dance ...

St. Thomas, 19th July 2003

Kumina in the field. I have no spirit, I'm not connecting. There's not even much of an atmosphere with all of us crowding in a half circle surrounding the booth stand in the Kumina yard. There's a post in the middle, surrounded by the drummers, the scraper and the shakas. White, black, green, yellow and red cloth hanging from it. They start beating the drum, the playing cast and kbandu. I recognize most of it from my reading and probably because I already have a preconception of what to expect, I'm not as stunned as I could be. The Kumina Queen's presence is of course captivating. She's huge, rolling her big belly, shaking her buttocks and heaving her heavy breasts – fertility is not just a concept, it comes to life. Her festival fashion dress distinguishes her from the other crowd, who are all dressed in street wear, baseball-cap and sneakers for the men, while the women though seem to make an effort for dress and head-tie. So I wonder, is the festival dress a costume for our "show" as well as the preaching? For I honestly didn't think they "preach" as much in Kumina. I really find the "Jesus"-talk surprising as there are a lot of things coming together here, making it a bit of Jamaican redemption scramble. A little bit of this a little bit of that. I'm not the only one to demonstrate fatigue. Wasn't Kumina supposed to be "scary"? Mystical? I do not feel the spirit here, but a heavy cloud of ganja lingers in the air and empty bottles of white rum appear as "new" instruments among the musicians. Yet, the "signs" are all there. The songs and the lit candle on top of the Kumina Queen's head and eventually one woman even gets "possessed" and someone with a video-camera follows her down the hill towards the ancestor's

(dead)yard, careful not to miss a single thing. I realize how detached I am from what is actually going on. "One blood" for sure, but still very different people! And while the Queen, - I wish I knew her name - is pulling me up from the ground and "inviting" me in the circle ["one people"]! I don't feel "right" there. I can't roll the pelvis, not even shuffle the feet correctly and it don't seem like you should make the "effort" either, because as soon as you show the "effort" in your face, the spirit's gone, cause you don't connect to what you're doing. My body doesn't respond, for it doesn't know the language. De girl cyan't dance. It's a gift to be passed on. It's something that you grow into as you are born and raised. It cyan't be learnt. And I'm very much in doubt of it being made into a "technique" - because the moment you make it "technique" it's secularized, separated, void of spiritual meaning. While there might remain traces or probably, when something else is added as creative imagination the movement brings about something new that again bears spirit, but of a different kind. Well. Jamaicans own a gift that I obviously don't know how to talk about. Shuffling careful not to step on the candle between my feet on the ground, I feel fairly uneasy. Not joining or joining the circle doesn't make much of a difference for me. It's the same being in Kumina or anywhere else in this country [...] ¹

Enthusiasm notwithstanding, half-way through the field trip, I had obviously come to realize that I did not exactly connect to the ritual experience of Kumina nor particularly excel in performing Jamaican dances. I had become the Other. And yet, after coming back to this entry several times, I now enjoy the NDTC's dance theatre performances actually the more because of it. In fact, watching *Kumina* from my cushion seat in the audience, I do not have to feel as an intruder into somebody's sacred space, nor do I have any disturbing feelings about satisfying some sort of sensationalist desire for the supernatural or esoteric. This is not meant to criticize field work, yet I believe that a responsible ethnographer will need more experience than I had at that point. While I could not fully engage with the Kumina ritual as well as Jamaican Revival practice, dance theatre, however, allows for an easier access and understanding of these forms. Abstracted through the NDTC's modern dance lens, African Caribbean religions and aesthetics become more palpable for the foreigner, if he/she is willing to let these dances speak of their cultural heritage and postcolonial (hi)story. The NDTC's modern dance imprint thus serves their dance repertoire in that NDTC choreography does not exhibit the ultimate 'Other,' while at the same time

1 Entry from my personal research journal.

it carefully refrains from being the exact ‘Self-Same.’ Operating from in-between that binary, Jamaican dance theatre thus presents the epitome of postcolonial hybridity, which as an unfixed negotiation of alterity and sameness is as fragile as the NDTC’s dance works. Only in an instant can such fluidity of transformative identity be achieved and yet it offers much more than mere possibility as dance theatre has become the legitimate site of Jamaica’s national self-definition.

As concerns the research process and methodology: dislocating the scholarly self, in-between the tourist-I, the dance critic’s point of view and what I actually like to conceive of as simply being “me,” the journey to Jamaica’s dance has actually taught me much more than just a couple of difficult dance steps. And lastly, I believe that this surplus information lies at the very heart of the NDTC’s dance theatre works. Jamaican dance theatre is no dance for dance’s sake, since there is a distinct story for each of the many folk movements to be told. Of course, this book can only provide a glimpse into the depth of Jamaica’s dance heritage and political struggle, however, so it is hoped, such a glimpse might have otherwise been too easily overlooked. What hence poses as Jamaican dance theatre’s “colonial mimicry” presents in fact a highly innovative dance style, which in its “syncretic theatre” blend of Caribbean folk and modern dance expression creates a nationally significant performance of postcolonial politics.

