

ACIJ/JMB HOSTS LECTURE — ROOTS OF ROUTES: THE AFRICAN ORIGINS OF CARIBBEAN PEOPLE

The African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/Jamaica Memory Bank (ACIJ/JMB) hosted a lecture - Roots of Routes: The African Origins of Caribbean People - at the Institute of Jamaica Lecture Hall on November 7, 2019. The lecture was presented by Professor Verene Shepherd, Professor of Social History, University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, and Director, Centre for Reparation Research, Regional Headquarters, UWI, Mona. Dr. Enrique Okenve, Lecturer, Department of History and Archaeology, UWI, Mona, moderated the question-and-answer session.



Prof. Verene Shepherd

The lecture focussed on the origins of our enslaved African ancestors and their experiences while transported and traded in the Americas. It highlighted the brutality of their experience on the sugar plantations in the West Indies, evidenced by the number of enslaved Africans who lost their lives along the way. The lecture also presented findings which indicate the continued trafficking of enslaved Africans after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. It further examined the cultural legacies that remain today, despite the attempts by the colonisers to undermine them.

Database 2.0, (developed by David Eltis and his team), was used during the lecture to create a greater understanding of the roots and the routes of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. The database - found on website - slavevoyages.org - documents the ships that arrived at various ports around the Caribbean and throws light on the African cultural origins of the region. The audience received a demonstration of this database for their future use.

The lecture was delivered to a capacity audience mainly from the following high schools: St. Jago High, Queens's High, Kemps Hill High, Enid Bennett High, St. Mary High, St. Andrew High, Maggoty High, Annotto Bay High, Thompson Town Secondary High, Ferncourt High, Holy Childhood High, and Jamaica College.

Also in attendance were: His Excellency Mr. Denys Wibaux, Ambassador of France to Jamaica; Prof. Maureen Warner-Lewis, retired UWI lecturer; Dr. Jean Small, retired UWI lecture; Ms. Carol Miller of Sankofa; and Mr. Richard Morgan, Principal of Thompson Town Secondary High School.

THE JAMAICAN JONKONNU TRADITION

The Jonkonnu tradition was formed centuries ago and reached its peak during the 18th century when enslaved Africans on sugar plantations and large pens formed Jonkonnu bands as a major part of their Christmas holiday celebration. At first, the bands were encouraged on the estates but were later suppressed by the authorities due to a fear of the event being a guise under which uprisings could be planned. The authorities discouraged the gatherings of Blacks, as well as the use of drums, and the blowing of horns and conch shells, which were not only a part of the musical elements of the bands but also a means of communication by the enslaved. After emancipation in 1838, Jonkonnu

suffered a decline as the non-conformist missionaries tried to get rid of pagan amusements among converts.

The custom is not as visible today as in the past but can still be observed at several community and state events during the Christmas period. Today, Jonkonnu bands may include a mixture of traditional and more recent characters such as a Cow-Head or Horse-Head, King, Queen (wearing a veil), Devil, Pitchy-Patchy, Red Indian (in mirrors and feathers), a Pregnant 'Woman' and a Policeman. The group is usually accompanied by musicians who play a fife (the lead instrument), bass, rattling drums, and a grater. Jonkonnu characters vary across the island, but all characters are traditionally played by men. If the characters speak at all, it will be in hoarse whispers for, as part of the tradition, their identities should not be known. Those who watch the antics displayed by the Jonkonnu are expected to contribute money to the band to defray the cost of their costumes or to provide refreshment for the group.



The Devil



A Pregnant `Woman`

The Jonkonnu band today is a far cry from what it was during the days of slavery, but it is believed that the Jonkonnu practices, forms and structures, such as the music, dance, characters, masquerade and secrecy, probably originated in West African secret societies. The earliest masquerades in Jamaica wore animal heads (often horned) and tails, and were associated with fear and secrecy. These elements in Jonkonnu persist to the present day and children are usually frightened by masked Jonkonnu dancers.

Today, Jonkonnu is viewed as a very important aspect of Jamaican heritage and is considered an Afro-Jamaican, secular Christmas festival. It is kept alive mainly through government-sponsored events.



A Jonkonnu Band

ACIJ/JMB HOSTS LECTURE: AFRICAN RETENTIONS IN FUNERAL RITES IN THE CARIBBEAN

African Retentions in Funeral Rites in the Caribbean, a lecture presented by retired University of the West Indies lecturer, Dr. Jean Small, was held at the Institute of Jamaica Lecture Hall on October 31, 2019. Hosted by the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/Jamaica Memory Bank (ACIJ/JMB), the lecture was moderated by Mr. David Stimpson, Curator, National Museums Jamaica (NMJ).



Dr. Jean Small delivers her lecture

The lecture examined the legacy of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and the criss-crossing of the Western world and the African worldviews in an artificially created environment. It also highlighted the concept of cultural time in the two worldviews and how that concept affects belief systems and ritual forms, particularly in regard to funerals practised today in the Caribbean.

The lecture attracted a large turnout of students from high schools all across the island as well tertiary-level students. Schools/colleges in attendance were: Merl Grove High, Holy Childhood High, Morant Bay High, Penwood High, Ferncourt High, Queen's High, Gaynstead High, Maggoty High, Mico Teachers' College, and the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts.

Her Excellency Mrs. Janet Olisa, Nigerian High Commissioner to Jamaica; Honorary Consul to Guyana, Ms. Indera Persaud; Ms. Adziko Simba Gegele; Ms. Lucille Junkere; and Rev. Peter Espeut also attended.



A section of the audience at the lecture

THE BURU MASQUERADE TRADITION IN JAMAICA

Buru is a recreational, African-derived masquerade (similar to Jonkonnu) which the enslaved population on the plantations in the West Indies practised at Christmastime. Attendant with the masquerade were African-based dancing, drumming and singing.

Buru celebrations usually began on Christmas Eve and continued to New Year's Day.

Originally, Buru was used as a fund-raising activity by the enslaved to buy food and other items for their Christmas feast. The performers created a procession in the streets which entertained spectators and passers-by.

The main characters in the Buru masquerade included the Horse-Head, Donkey and Madder (Mother) Lundy. Other characters were gradually introduced, including Cow-Head and Doctor. These characters were all played by men as it was regarded as inappropriate for women to lift their skirts as the dance movements required. Masks were used as part of the costumes to conceal the identity of the wearer. It was necessary for the Buru characters to be masked as often the characters poked fun at individuals or events in the community through song, so the activity was not only entertaining but also served as a type of social commentary. Other characters were gradually introduced, including Cow-Head and Doctor. These characters were all played by men as it was regarded as inappropriate for women to lift their skirts as the dance movements required. Masks were used as part of the costumes to conceal the identity of the wearer. It was necessary for the Buru characters to be masked as often the characters poked fun at individuals or events in the community through song, so the activity was not only entertaining but also served as a type of social commentary. Today, in Old Harbour Bay, St. Catherine, for example, Buru is practised on Christmas Day and participants spend weeks composing songs which tell of the scandalous behaviour of residents who have to pay the masqueraders to leave.

In this regard, the Buru masquerade also functions as a cleansing mechanism, (a feature which was shared by its West African antecedents), and as a watchdog in the community as the group has a duty to scrutinise the actions and behaviour of fellow community members. Therefore, persons within the community are always mindful that if they participate in any scandalous activity or display similar behaviour, they could possibly become the topic of a Buru song.

The Buru group usually consists of about 15 members who carry on the tradition from retired or deceased family members. The characters are always accompanied by three drummers, and other musicians who use scrapers, rattles, and other percussion instruments. The drums used are the fundeh, the repeater and the bass, which are also used by the Nyahbinghi Order of Rastafari.

In addition to Old Harbour Bay, the Buru was also traditionally practised in Clarendon, in communities such as Bowens and Hayes.

THE TRADITIONAL USES OF SORREL IN JAMAICA

Sorrel is a European herb plant with arrow-shaped leaves, red flowers, and stems. Its name is derived from the old French word *surele*. Like many popular plants grown in the Caribbean region, sorrel has its origins in West Africa. Also known as Roselle, or less by its scientific name *Hibiscus sabdariffa*, sorrel is a species of the Hibiscus family.

There are different types of sorrel grown in the region; however, the deep, red fruit of the Roselle is the most common variety found in the Caribbean. Sorrel was planted in most gardens on the island of Jamaica. The plant grows to at least six feet tall, takes a period of one year to bloom, and dies after it is harvested. The crop is sold in many shops, supermarkets and markets islandwide.



Fresh Sorrel

Traditionally, sorrel is used in Jamaica for a variety of purposes. It is considered to be a medicinal plant as it contains a wide range of vitamins and minerals. Sorrel is commonly taken orally for the treatment of sinusitis, bronchitis, high cholesterol levels, managing high blood pressure, and enhancing the function of the liver. It is also a high source of Vitamin A. Additionally, sorrel is used to make jams, soups, teas and drinks. The sorrel drink is prepared by adding ginger and spices. It is washed and placed in a large container with grated ginger, orange peel, and cloves. Boiling water is poured in the container and the contents are left for hours to infuse. It is thereafter strained and sweetened to taste. The addition of rum or red wine is optional. For preservation, it is bottled with a few grains of rice.



The Sorrel Drink

The drink is dark red, a bit sour, with a raspberry-like flavour. It has remained the most popular drink in Jamaica and the Caribbean at large, especially at Christmastime.

When visiting friends or relatives during the festive season, visitors expect to be served a cool drink of sorrel. This has become a part of the Jamaican culture.

INGREDIENTS FOR SORREL DRINK:

1 pound sorrel

2 quarts boiling water

2 cups sugar

1 piece of ginger

8-12 pimento grains

Rum/wine (optional)

A few rice grains or barley

(Contributor: *Rochelle Clarke, Acting Senior Library Assistant, ACIJ/JMB*)

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