



A Division of the Institute of Jamaica

# **ACIJ/JMB FACT SHEET – KUMINA**



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica (ACIJ) was established in 1972 as a division of the Institute of Jamaica to deepen public awareness of African cultural retention and its relationship to the other ethnic groups in Jamaica. In 1990, the Jamaica Memory Bank (JMB) was integrated into the ACIJ, forming the ACIJ/JMB. The JMB documents Jamaica's social history via audiovisual recordings of the memories of senior citizens throughout the country. The ACIJ/JMB has a wealth of resources relating to Afro-Jamaican and other ethnic cultural heritage and a vast area of Jamaica's social history.

In fulfilling its mandate, the ACIJ/JMB has developed a systematic research and documentation programme, thereby establishing its importance as a centre for the study of African presence in Jamaican and Caribbean culture. This programme includes research conducted on traditional dance forms, various aspects of language, traditional and popular music, religions, food, social movement, herbal medicine, festivals, and community histories.

The ACIJ/JMB also maintains a vibrant Publications Unit. Through this medium, the division informs the public of aspects of our culture by producing Fact Sheets. These Fact Sheets are posted on the division's website, and stored in the division's library, and are used by researchers, teachers, students, and the general public. They are also widely distributed to schools and colleges islandwide, as well as to various divisions and affiliate bodies of the Institute of Jamaica.

## KUMINA

Kumina is a musico-religious form which is based mainly on communication with the ancestors of the Congo people of Africa and their descendants in Jamaica. The dance ritual is also performed at times for recreational purposes.

Kumina is believed to have been brought to Jamaica by the indentured Africans who came to the island in the 1840s to 1860s, particularly from the Congo. Many of these indentured Africans settled in the parish of St. Thomas, which has the largest contingent of Kumina followers. The late Kumina Queen, Imogene 'Queenie' Kennedy, was called to lead a Kumina group in Dalvey, St. Thomas. However, there are other Kumina groups in Portland, St. Catherine, St. Mary, Kingston, and other areas.

### Dual Soul

Kumina is based on the Central African belief that everyone possesses a dual soul: the personal spirit (which contains the personality of the individual) and the individual's shadow. When someone dies, the personal spirit goes to Nzambi Mpungu (the all-powerful god), and these spirits can become ancestral and return to earth. It is believed that the shadow remains in the grave with the corpse but can leave at any time. If not given a proper burial, the shadow can become a wandering spirit (called a 'duppy') and a menace to the family of the deceased and to persons in neighbouring areas.

### Kumina Ceremonies

A Kumina ceremony is held to summon spirits for assistance. It is believed that there are three ranks of Kumina spirits: Sky, Earth, and Ancestral. Ancestral spirits are more often consulted because they are believed to be more accessible. Songs and drumbeats during ceremonies summon spirits to enter and possess the Kumina dancers. Spirit possession is called Myal. On death, the personal spirit of a person possessed by ancestral spirits during Kumina rituals can join other ancestral spirits who are able to return to earth. Ancestral spirits can also be called upon to aid the living.

Kumina ceremonies are held for specific purposes, mainly death in a family (wakes, entombments, and memorials). They are also performed to celebrate births; weddings; thanksgivings, for healing, and to remove the wrong kind of spirit from a person. Kumina dances can also be performed at public sessions or in private ceremonies.

A Kumina ceremony marks individual life crises and family events and, technically, is both a rite of incorporation and a rite of passage. The three most important elements in a Kumina session are singing, dancing, and drumming, which usually begins at sundown and takes place around a central pole. Specific colours are used for specific ceremonies and this is reflected in the dress of the leading participants and in the decorations of the central pole.



A Kumina session held around a central pole.

Kumina ceremonies may be held in an open yard, a temporary structure made of bamboo poles covered with coconut leaves, or a permanent structure that has supporting posts placed symbolically at the four cardinal points of the earth. Participants in Kumina ceremonies in order of importance are as follows:

- The Queen/leader
- The drummers and percussionists
- Singers and dancers
- Members of other Kumina bands
- Guests
- General public

The Queen/leader participates fully in the ceremony. Singers and dancers who are familiar with the African language can also participate fully. Some members of other Kumina bands can join in at appropriate times. The guests and general public are regarded as outsiders.

### **Kumina Tables**

Prior to the start of a Kumina ceremony of celebration or to correct disharmony, a table is laid in the ceremonial enclosure, set with a variety of items to appease the spirits. Water, sugared water, wine, rice, flowers, fruits, aerated water, bread, and candles are included on the table. Additionally, a small table with foods known to be favourites of the spirits is sometimes placed under or near to the main table. Earth, air, fire, and water, (all of the elements), must be present in some form on, under, or near to the table.

Colours are also significant. The colour theme of a ceremony is reflected in the materials that cover the table. The materials for making the table are put in place long in advance of the ceremony. These materials are usually a length of deal board on wooden supports that can be quickly dismantled after the table has been 'broken', that is, after the food and drink are shared. By then, the candles, placed on the ground near to the drums, will be burning low. This happens after midnight, soon after the blood sacrifice has been made.

### **Leadership**

The leader of the Kumina ceremony is called a King or Queen and is the permanent leader, with a band of disciples. The leader is expected to be very familiar with the dances and rituals, having undergone a long apprenticeship before attaining the highest position in the band. The leader controls the spirits and is therefore responsible for the success or otherwise of the ceremony. The King or Queen uses spirit conductors, such as rum, or dances with a glass of water balanced on the head to catch the spirit.



Kumina Queen Imogene 'Queenie' Kennedy with a glass of water balanced on her head.

The leader also supervises the sacrifice of a fowl or goat, as blood is regarded as food for the spirits. At the main types of ceremonies, two types of songs are sung: African 'country songs' (which are the most sacred), and 'bailo' songs.

In the Kumina world, the position of the leader is not questioned. The leader is the most important member of a Kumina group or bands.

### **Drumming**

Drumming is central to a Kumina ceremony as the drum rhythms are used to summon and control different types of spirits. Like leaders, drummers serve a long apprenticeship period and command great

respect because of their importance to the success of a ceremony. Only men play the Kumina drums and, before each ceremony, their heads are blessed with a libation of rum.

The Kbandu (or Bandu) and the Playing Kyas (or Playing Cas) are the two drums used in the Kumina ensemble and each play a specific rhythm. Shakers, scrapers, clappers and catta sticks are other instruments played.



Kumina Queen Imogene 'Queenie' Kennedy and Kumina band.

The cya drummer is probably ranked second in importance to the leader as he has the power to invoke spirits through his drumming. It is the excitement that he triggers that encourages the singers and stimulates the spirits to possess the congregation. The lead drummer works closely with the leader and responds to every signal and hint. It is also possible for the drummer to become possessed by a spirit.

### **Kumina Beliefs**

Kumina people know their family histories. As the primary aim of Kumina is to contact ancestral spirits and gods, the past to present continuum must be maintained. Lines of communication to the spirit world must also use the language of the ancestors.

The invisible world of the spirit is very real to Kumina believers. They firmly believe that, after death, ancestors maintain an interest in human affairs. This can be for good or evil, depending on the type of relationship between the living and the dead. The major aim of Kumina members is to keep in constant touch with ancestral and other spirits and gods and to constantly appease and honour them. Whenever there is a special need, these spirits and gods are entertained in ceremonies and rituals for guidance and advice.

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