

Kumina: Roots, Rhythm, and Reasoning

Marsha M. Hall

African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica /
Jamaica Memory Bank

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Abstract

This paper examines *Kumina*, an African-derived Jamaican music and dance art form traditionally practised and performed in the eastern interior parishes of St. Thomas—the 'birthplace of *Kumina*'—and the underbellies of Kingston. It presents new perspectives on one of Jamaica's foremost elements of intangible cultural heritage, which owes its origin to Africans transported to the island as indentured labourers from the Congo-Angola region of Central Africa. Of interest are the communities of *Kumina* practitioners and symbolic cultural representations expressed during ritual ceremonies. These include, for example, the authentic sounds of the drums, which serve as a true symbol repository of its cultural roots; and collective healing through music, songs, dances, and the Kikongo language. The latter has unfortunately waned over the years, as observed by Carter (1986: 3-12), who stated that, "it seems that 'language' is passing out of use in daily life."

Seminal publications and interpretations on *Kumina* have unearthed a wealth of ancestral knowledge (Lewin 2000: 215-253; Warner-Lewis 1977: 57-78; Schuler 1980: 311). Yet public discourse is often interspersed with negative stigmas regarding superstitions, obeah, and cult-like behaviours, as well as common perceptions of adherents as backward. Other ethnocentric views within the context of Jamaican society have resulted in misconceptions about *Kumina* ritual practices.

This paper examines the current trends, particularly in terms of how aspects of *Kumina* rituals are consumed by cultural forces external to the community and gradually caricatured into popular culture. These exigencies demand critical attention since the availability of living practitioners who possess an innate knowledge of *Kumina* is severely

limited. The data collection process included ethnographical documentation and structured interviews (with twelve *Kumina* practitioners) designed to elicit clarifications and elaborations on *Kumina*. Sufficient time was also allowed for the word processing of field notes on the days on which they were taken to guard against assumptions. Additional methods included archival research, which was conducted using the extensive database of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica / Jamaica Memory Bank (ACIJ/JMB), reviews of the existing literature, and fieldwork carried out by academicians familiar with the terrain and sociocultural mores of various communities where *Kumina* is a lived experience.

Ongoing research shows that *Kumina* is broadly influenced by its predecessor, the original 'Bongo nation'. One concern derives from the fact that its ideations of authenticity are constantly challenged by the proximity of mainstream culture via social media. To generate novel ways of engaging with *Kumina* practitioners, this paper recommends that researchers recognise, and correct, conflicting information that under-mines rituals evoked during traditional ceremonies. The existence of temporal and spatial boundaries among adherents—how *Kumina* is performed and when the need for rites arises—shows the necessity of offering *Kumina* communities culturally responsive support with preserving knowledge transfer, which is important to practitioners and their families.

Introduction

Originating from the Congo-Angola region of Central Africa and transported to the Caribbean island of Jamaica with the arrival of indentured Africans in the late 19th Century, *Kumina* / *Kalunga* / *Kadunga* is a rhythmic expressive art form characterised by its vibrancy and spirituality. While there is no set definition for the practice, *Kumina* is often described as an African-Jamaicanised musico-religious cultural tradition based mainly on communication with the dead; that is, ancestors of the Congo people in Africa and their descendants in Jamaica. Warner-Lewis¹ describes *Kumina* as “a commemoration of biological and community ancestors by way of their possession of the bodies of celebrants.” This can be interpreted as a juxtaposition of life birth and rebirth. At its most basic, *Kumina* is defined as a Jamaican-danced religion with Congolese origins². It is a syncopation of expressive communication; a vibrant, spiritual celebration of life and death primarily ritualised through ceremonies, which include, notably; *Myaal* (physical and spiritual healing through possession), births, *Wakes* (an all-night vigil for the dead traditionally held on the first night, when the body is washed and laid out for viewing), funerary rites, songs, dances, music, the Kikongo language, and, more importantly for healing practices, protection and justice. The *Kikongo* or *Kimbundu* (the language of the BaKongo people of West and Central Africa—modern-day Congo—Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa / Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola) is still spoken in *Kumina* communities. Its use as a functionary language is rapidly disappearing, however, except when chanted during specific *Kumina* ceremonies. Whatever the discourse, a common theme and agreed-on narrative is the African cultural retention ethos emanating from

¹ Maureen Warner-Lewis, 'Kumina fieldwork: findings and revisions', p. 23.

² Isaac Akrong, 'Ghanaian Gome and Jamaican Kumina: West African influences', pp. 149-162.

most of the research conducted on *Kumina* by several authors: that is, a distinct Kongo-Jamaican connection (Kongo refers to the language of ritual in Jamaica) that has continued to transcend time and space, thus retaining an unmatched vibrancy across the island.

As a researcher at the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/Jamaica Memory Bank (ACIJ/JMB), I was given the opportunity to undertake this research, which speaks to the sustainable initiatives undertaken by Jamaica's Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment, and Sport to safeguard the country's intangible cultural heritage. Yet it is important to note that this research is not a novelty, and the archival material (audio/visual recordings) at the institute is a testament to the rich documentation of seminal works on *Kumina* deposited there for the benefit of the general public.

With no linear links of information or explanations, for some adherents, "*Kumina* is a tradition or descendants' tradition of drumming and transition through the spirit or spiritual world, an inborn concept even; some people adapt or adjust."³ For Adoma, daughter of the late great *Kumina* Queen Bernice Henry, "*Kumina* is our ancestors' African dance, coming from Africa; it was left behind by the ancestors, and what we have as the younger generation must be shared with everyone."⁴ The hierarchial position of the queen is a culturally significant one, since the title is based on her healing prowess and ability to communicate with the ancestors, since it is the queen who leads dancers during *Myaal* and at *Wakes*.

For others, *Kumina* is the holistic expression of a lifestyle, of a certain set of African people including their expert herbalism, and recalls the memory of a community. Individuals' ability to direct or redirect their participation in *Kumina* at the community level plays a fundamental role and offers a type of value in the transformation of rituals marked by cultural visibility. These dual approaches to the practices of *Kumina* are the reason why practitioners echo similar sentiments on how *Kumina* rituals express useful social attitudes that are effective when shared collectively. Such an occasion was evident at the home of Lenroy Alexander, fondly known as "Bongo Shut," whose place among *Kumina* adherents and regular community folks is one earmarked by respect. The interchange between children, youths, and adults at the first beat of the *Kumina* drum saw a large gathering converging in his yard. Several people echoed, "from a Bongo Shut yaad wi hear *Kumina*, yu know all a wi haffi dede."⁵ This translates simply as Bongo Shut being a respected *Kumina* practitioner whose home is known for housing some of the most enthralling *Kumina* music, which draws people there. In this community culture, the attitudes toward *Kumina* demonstrated that engagement in *Kumina* activities, at least the musical aspect, was a natural part of the setting and that there is no social conflict, but simply a community at work. Ultimately, it is these inherent celebratory exchanges of *Kumina* that frame it as a continuing cultural social agency of Afro-Jamaican traditional culture. Here, ritualised performances become a means of preserving a historical legacy that reinterrogates how *Kumina* is consumed beyond the traditional communities. Researchers, therefore,



Image: Courtesy of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica / Jamaica Memory Bank. Kumina music session from left to right: Angie on the grater, Cha-Cha Ben seated on the Playing Kyas, Shakkaman on the Shakka, and Bongo Shut dancing with walking sticks.

³ Simon Davis, 'Kumina'. Interview by Marsha M. Hall. Audio/visual recordings (Kingston: African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/Jamaica Memory Bank archives, 2022).

⁴ Adoma Buchanan, 'Kumina' Interview by Marsha M. Hall. Audio/visual recordings, (St. Thomas, Market Road, Port Morant, 2023).

⁵ Translation (from we hear *Kumina* playing at Bongo Shut yard you know all of us have to be there). Lenroy Alexander, 'Kumina'. Interview by Marsha M. Hall. Audio/visual recordings, (St. Thomas, Spring Bank, Port Morant, 2023).

must find sustainable ways of engaging the *Kumina* community through culturally responsive strategies directed at prioritising their needs without ignoring or overlooking their lived experiences.

Although the etymology of the word *Kumina* is a subject of ongoing debate, archival research points to a historical and cultural origin in the Congo region. One likely source is believed to be *Kambinda*, the name of a particular Bantu people.⁶ One thing that is certain is its links with the region of Kongo and traditional dance music known as *Kumunu*, a drumming style, which is particularly prevalent in Kinkenge, the Manianga region located in the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo. This genre of music and dancing is well-known in this area and is played almost continuously.⁷ Needless to say, *Kumina* in its original form has been modified and adapted over the years by the African indentured labourers in Jamaica, although its presence and lineage are strongest in St. Thomas. It is also practised by numerous members of the African Diaspora in Jamaica, however, and remains popular in the parishes of St. Mary, St. Catherine, Portland, and Kingston, where ritualised performances are anchored in ancestral identity affiliations, establishing a fragile bridge between practitioners' performative roles on the periphery of mainstream culture. These are intentional re-enactments of memories that are both real and perceived through physical bodies operating in social spaces where a time-honoured tradition is preserved by people who strongly assert their "Bongo" / Kongo, selves. The word "Bongo is a derivative of the original Kongo term *muntu a mbongo*, and in Jamaica refers to African-descended persons."⁸

When examined from a cultural standpoint, "Bongo" in the local vernacular is often cast in a derogatory light as something dreadful, terrible, or used to refer to an unkempt person. However, members of the *Kumina* community have reclaimed this word as a legitimate source of power connected with their sense of African pride and identity. "Bongo means real grassroots man, even though Bongo Nation is scattered."⁹ The cultural significance of this statement should not be overlooked, since "people who are into *Kumina*, play *Kumina* who 'ave a connection wid de ancestors are Bongo people."¹⁰ Interestingly, a *Kumina* adherent conceptualises Bongo from a musical standpoint, as "a deeper playing of the drums and then a lighter playing of the drums, den yu move more in the spirit pon de toe, more African ancestors dance."¹¹ Within *Kumina* communities, they cannot be separated from their 'African Bongo' or ancestors, and this necessary counter-narrative is not merely a relic of a long-lost African culture, but a stabilising force. Our basic understanding of the sociocultural issues that surround *Kumina* practitioners and their ritualised practices has shaped the attitudes and experiences that underpin their beliefs.

Review of the Literature

Documentation exists on the study of *Kumina* in Jamaica, with several extensive studies on the topic having been publicly archived and made available via audio/visual recordings and viewings at the African Caribbean

⁶ Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, *Encyclopedia of African Religion*.

⁷ Kenneth M. Bilby and Fu-Kiau Kia Bunseki, 'Kumina: A Kongo-Based Tradition in the New World,' 473-528.

⁸ Maureen Warner-Lewis, 'Nkuyu: Spirit Messengers of the Kumina,' pp. 449-465.

⁹ Lenroy Alexander, 'Kumina.' Interview by Marsha M. Hall. Audio/visual recordings (St. Thomas, Spring Bank, Port Morant, 2023).

¹⁰ Translation (people who are adherents of Kumina play Kumina; those who have a connection with the ancestors are Bongo people). Alexander, 'Kumina' interview.

¹¹ Buchanan, 'Kumina' interview.

Institute of Jamaica/Jamaica Memory Bank library. Notable examples include Joseph Graessle Moore's masterpiece, Olive Lewin's invaluable ethnographic research, and Maureen Warner-Lewis's stellar contributions. However, *Kumina* remains under-researched, particularly with regards to the state of *Kumina* in contemporary Jamaica, as noted during this fieldwork. Central to the field of ethnography is recording and gathering detailed information about the research area under study. A continuous review of the literature highlights that *Kumina* can be found within several areas of scholarly literature. It is typically mentioned as an Afro-Jamaican religion or an 'intra-African' cultural tradition.¹² Traditional writings on *Kumina* focus on capturing the practices—including secular ceremonies, dance, and music—that developed from the beliefs and traditions brought to the island by Kongo enslaved people and indentured labourers from the Congo region of West and Central Africa, during the post-emancipation era.¹³ Indentured labourers were Africans who, at the end of slavery, arrived on the island to work on the sugar plantations, replacing the previously enslaved Africans. In other words, they were free people. One recurring theme or concern in the literature reviewed relates to the creole influences and strong overtones in *Kumina*. For Hall¹⁴, creolisation can be extended to include several meanings, encompassing language and culture, which he states remains the basis of the creative practices and expressions in the region. Interest in this research is of national and international significance as the Jamaican government proposes to nominate *Kumina* for inscription on one of the UNESCO Lists of intangible cultural heritage.

Methodology

In order to gain a better insight into and first-hand experience of the *Kumina* communities, I undertook this research in my professional capacity as a Research Officer at the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/Jamaica Memory Bank. Between October 2022 and March 2023, I travelled to the eastern parish of St. Thomas, also referred to as the "forgotten parish" due to its lack of proper roadways (a situation which has vastly improved in 2024). The research consisted of structured interviews, including audiovisual recordings with twelve *Kumina* practitioners. Here, *Kumina* practitioners are described as individuals who were born into a family with a long-standing history of actively practising and performing *Kumina* rituals. The questions were designed to elicit clarifications and elaborations about *Kumina*, leaving sufficient time to word process the field notes on the days on which the interviews took place, to guard against assumptions. The interviews were conducted individually at the practitioners' places of residence, where each person was able to elaborate on and demonstrate some ritualised performances associated with *Kumina* and speak the Kikongo language. These interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour and were recorded via film with the written consent of the interviewee; they were later transcribed.

The majority of elders who play a unique role in the preservation of *Kumina* knowledge have transitioned over to the other realm (died) and the younger generation's speaking abilities were limited to certain phrases or words.

¹² Kenneth Bilby and Fu-Kiau Kia Bunseki, 'Kumina: Kongo-based tradition in the world', pp. 473-527; Bandele Agyemang Davy, 'Kumina in Rural Southeastern Jamaica: Beyond Resistance to Antithetical-Hegemonic-Subsumption', p. 45.

¹³ Maureen Warner-Lewis, 'Nkuyu: Spirit Messengers of the Kumina', pp. 446-464.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, 'Creolite and the Process of Creolization', pp. 27-41.

Furthermore, many practitioners have left their homes in St. Thomas to go and live with extended families elsewhere since they were no longer earning a living from the *Kumina* Bandz. The impact of the global health pandemic in 2021 is not lost on the *Kumina* communities. During the interviews, it was clear that individuals no longer communicated with former adherents, due to either physical relocation, misplaced telephone numbers, or the inability to stay informed about others' whereabouts.

Myaal: Moving in the Ancestors' Spirit

At the core of *Kumina* is a thin line between the living and the dead. In the land of the living, one must find a balance to co-exist with the dead, since they are still 'living' members of the community. There are several ritualised syncretise practices and performances inherent in *Kumina* communities where ancestors are not only revered but feared. In the spirit world, *Myaal* illustrates a complex connection between the two. An identifiable and hard-to-miss feature of *Kumina*, *Myaal* is a portal or channel that connects and opens up communications with ancestral spirits commonly referred to as 'catching' the *Myaal* spirit. Davis explains that "*Myaal* is when someone is chanted away in the spirit, in *Myaal* you get vision. When yu come out yu relay de' message, you baptise then you get filled jus' like 'ow Christian people dem get inna' spirit."¹⁵ These are not pious acts towards any deity, however; this is a completely different way of engaging the physical body with the spirit world. As a manifestation of a pervasive ancestral presence, *Myaal* reveals the sources and currents that make up *Kumina's* powerful visual culture. This is perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of *Kumina*; it involves a personal encounter where the spirit speaks, and you also respond to the spirit. The ancestors show up in different forms that cannot be easily defined or 'put into words' from an academic point of view.

Myaal is a state of being, under the direction of the spirits. When the spirits come to you, these are related to the Africans from the olden days, old Africans the ancestors, you are a vessel through which.¹⁶

There are numerous layers to *Myaal* due to its ritualised nature, as revealed in several interviews. Traditionally, there are two types of *Myaal*: a "Searching *Myaal*" attached to spirits and a "Good *Myaal*." Usually, the former includes some type of message from the ancestors, as they are seeking a living being to accomplish or provide a specific task for revelation. In other words, this is 'unfinished business' that needs to be completed by an adherent or family member on behalf of an ancestor known as the spirit, who will not 'rest' until they are satisfied with the outcome. The latter—Good *Myaal*—is believed to be the most powerful manifestation of ancestral possession centred on individuals' needs for physical and spiritual healing, or for reprieve against social injustices. Traditionally, it is performed to cure illnesses or to produce specific incantations and rituals to ensure the believers' children to secure decent or wealthy spouses. For this reason, some *Myaals* are trouble and crosses. Individuals do not participate in all types of *Myaal*. This is where the connotations of obeah are spoken of by

¹⁵ Translation ("Myaal you get vision from the ancestors. When you come out you relay the message, you baptise then you get filled similar to how Christian people are filled with the Holy Spirit"). Davis, 'Kumina', audio/visual interview.

¹⁶ Davis, 'Kumina' interview.

the general Jamaican populace, who are not knowledgeable when it comes to the ritualised practices of *Kumina*. Consequently, 'Searching *Myaal*' is a medium or life force, invoking possessions of some sort with the dead occupying living bodies but not for posterity.

When spirits become uneasy in their quest to find a relative, the spirit will enter another person if unable to find who it is looking for. Usually this occurs with family when there is a generation gap and that person who is possessed by the spirit must communicate...¹⁷

Though *Kumina* ritualised practices are not malleable, practitioners can manipulate them through various methods known only to them. The unmistakable signs of *Kumina* in the historical transmission of an 'authentic memory' set it apart from other Afro-Jamaican cultural practices. First and foremost, the original Africans were never enslaved people but arrived in Jamaica as indentured labourers, which may account for their cultural practices not being completely regulated on the plantation system. Such localised ritual practices allowed *Kumina* adherents to maintain their distinctiveness, immersed in the *présence Africaine*. *Myaal* is seen as an ancestral invocation celebrating spiritual expressions in moments of adherents' reality. For spectators, this might seem unsophisticated; as with any ritual when spirit possessions are publicly observed, it tends to elicit interrogation, and a certain degree of amusement, when it is consumed. Yet the strength of *Kumina* rests with the practitioners' commitment to these ceremonies: "wid *Myaal* is de Bongo people come in, it is the spirit entering you once de drum dem start to play."¹⁸

The common pattern that unites the various interpretations shared by *Kumina* interviewees is their consistent acknowledgement of the spirit's presence. In a series of twelve interviews conducted between October 2022 and March 2023, each *Kumina* practitioner continued to hold space for the spirits and to demonstrate undeniable respect for those who have transitioned into that realm. It is in these different elements and combinations of drumming, singing, and dancing that the variations in the practice can be seen, requiring a good level of knowledge of and cultural familiarity with *Kumina*. Consequently, the absence of any religiosity and system of structured power made it easier for *Kumina* to be transmitted across communities beyond St. Thomas. This has enabled a deep cross-community of connectivity amongst practitioners, adherents, and even onlookers who share in the 'gathering' of being African, "Like how yu cross de bridge fi cum inna St. Thomas, ya so is weh wi mek a cultural bridge."¹⁹

Kumina is a collaboration between people and the community; together, they celebrate the living traces of their ancestors, recognising that this is far from being a forgotten memory. Simultaneously, *Kumina* is both a symbol and an agent of a cultural phenomenon, and a site for the 'performing Africa,' with specific examples from the Central Kongo region.



Image: Courtesy of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/ Jamaica Memory Bank. *Kumina* funerary rites or 'set-up' for the late *Kumina* Queen Bernice Henry.



Image: Courtesy of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica. Libations to the African ancestors: *Kumina* practitioner Adoma Buchanan, daughter of the late *Kumina* Queen Bernice Henry.

¹⁷ Simpson, 'Kumina' interview.

¹⁸ Translation ("with *Myaal* the spirit of the Bongo people possesses you and enters your body once the drums begin to play"), Alexander, 'Kumina' interview.

¹⁹ Translation ("similar to how you cross the bridge to arrive into St. Thomas, here is where we create a cultural bridge"). Toyloy, Nugent, 'Kumina.' Interviewed by Marsha M. Hall. Audio/ visual recordings (St. Thomas, Spring Bank, Port Morant, 2023).

Kumina Music

Illuminating this practice is the combination of geography, language, dance, music, and songs, with each performance forging new identities symbolic of a reunifying force. Like *Bailo* and *Country* songs performed at the different *Kumina* ceremonies, most Afro-Caribbean ritualised performances are inextricably linked but run the risk of being subsumed into each other. Performed in different dialects, the *Country* songs are sung in the original 'African' or Kikongo language and are sacred to *Kumina's* ritual performances, but not for entertainment purposes, while the latter—*Bailo*—is a mixture of Jamaican Creole. These songs are entertaining by nature and their tone is reflective of dancehall subcultures and street slang (some of which it would not be appropriate to repeat here). While *Kumina* is not necessarily in a constant state of reconstruction, its subtle reinter-pretations by societal forces are based on individual experiences external to the community. One plausible explanation is attributed to *Kumina's* visibility and spirituality on display in several communities across Jamaica and at the national level through staged cultural performances, for example the annual events organised by the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission. As we re-interrogate *Kumina* in contemporary Jamaican society, this research proposes that the practitioners, ethnographic researchers, and stakeholders concerned need to ascertain whether aspects of this traditional cultural expression should be preserved and the extent to which its ritualised performances must be safeguarded in a culturally responsive and sensitive context. This is not a paradox, but rather a recognition of the communities (a people-centred approach), rooted in their ancestral foundational practices and stories, without having to contend with the idea of 'authenticity'. The "*Kumina*-tradition" continues to play a significant role in the remembrance of spiritual and physical liberation practised in this African-Atlantic environment.

Even though I have not found evidence of any contentious or public outcry against *Kumina* in recent years—there is the familiarity of a *subaltern* choosing to speak.²⁰ This began with the ancestors and has continued through descendants of *Kumina* communities who persisted and resisted colonial/postcolonial pressures against their ritualised practices. This is a belief held by popular *Kumina* drummer Ronald Perry, who goes by the moniker 'Cha-Cha Ben':

in de past our ancestors and wi could not play drum, cause police and society don't wan' wi to play it... it is too powerful, but nothing brings peace and love like de drum sound. It is so powerful dem nuh want to hear it.²¹

Nevertheless, *Kumina* has managed to continue, and even thrive, within the context of Jamaican culture. Similar responses were expressed by well-known artist, *Kumina* adjacent, and drum specialist Phillip Supersad, who explained that:



Image: Courtesy of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/Jamaica Memory Bank. *Kumina* musical instruments: Shakka (round top with small handle for shaking); Kbandu drum (elevated); and Playing Kyasdrum. The white rum (pouring libations to the ancestors) and candles (to guide the ancestors home) are both necessary and integral within *Kumina* ritual performances. 27 February 2023.

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'

²¹ Translation ("in the past our ancestors and we could not play drum, because police and society do not want us to play it... it is too powerful, but nothing brings peace and love like the drum sound. It is so powerful they do not want to hear it"). Ronald Perry, 'Kumina.' Interviewed by Marsha M. Hall. Audio / visual recording (St. Thomas, Springbank, Port Morant, 2023).

In early 1900 if yu madda ever hear dat yu gone down a Kumina yaaad yu very own modda wud a chop yu up to pieces, it was not incorporated into everyday or wider Jamaican society. It was seen as a very bad ting to be influenced by Kumina that was the culture we grew in. What has changed over the years for Kumina is still what has allowed it to exist and co-exist. These do not change eenuh, the basic rhythms of the drum dudum-dudum, any day that change Kumina done!²²

For the *Kumina* communities, it is the drums—the *Kbandu*/ *Banduand* *Playing Kyas*—without which no *Kumina* ritual performance would be complete, which speak, defy, resist, and refuse to remain on the periphery of silence. These drums are an integral part of *Kumina* and:

...there is well-known traditional dance music in the Kongo region known as Kumunu. While the dance which actually accompanies this kind of music is called Madinga, the drumming style itself is known as Kumunu. Kumunu drumming is found in many different contexts, such as: at marketplaces; or in marriage ceremonies... The Kumunu drumming style very closely parallels Jamaican Kumina drumming. In the Kumunu tradition of the Kongo, two different drums are used...²³

Enthusiasm is normally generated among the throngs of spectators at ritual performances. As explained by *Kumina* informants, these drums are not played for social or recreational purposes; they are played to communicate with the ancestors and to transmit energy through counterclockwise dancing patterns. The drum and the drummer direct you to move; they tell you when to stop and when to dance again.

Made from traditional tree trunks wrapped with strong vines sourced from tree barks and wrapped in she-goat skin, the drums are typically crafted from cedar wood, trumpet tree, or breadfruit trees. In the past, the drums were also constructed in disguise; the *Playing Kyas*, for example, were originally made from cask barrels used to store rum from the sugar estates. As an act of defiance, and to keep the drums hidden from the prying eyes of the plantation overseers and masters, the outward appearance of the *Playing Kyas* was later crafted similarly to the now famous Jamaican rum cask barrels.

When it comes to the influence and structural role of *Kumina* music, whether it is consumed through the 'public gaze' or as a source of healing in physical and psycho-social ways, the playing of these drums during these performances holds *Kumina* together. The captivating, rhythmic, pulsating beats emanating from the drums attuned to the frenzied movements of the dancers commune with the spirits and are also a *tour de force* of values retained through the preservation of tangible or intangible cultural heritage. Of course, the accompanying musical instruments—the *shakka* (made from seed or stone-filled gourds), *katta* or rhythm sticks (short thin sticks made from thin joints of the bamboo used for playing the drums), and grater (a metal square made from aluminium with tiny holes inserted all over)—are just as important. Yet the drums are a constant reminder of the



Image: Courtesy of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/ Jamaica Memory Bank. Conversations on *Kumina* drumming with musician Phillip Supersad. Included are the *Kbandu* and *Playing Kyas* drums directly in front. 22 March 2023.

²² Translation ("In the early 1900s if your mother hear that that you entered a *Kumina* yard, your very own mother would chop you to pieces lof course this is exaggerated), it was not accepted into everyday or wider Jamaican society. It was seen as a very bad thing to be influenced by *Kumina* that was the culture we grew in. What has changed over the years for *Kumina* is still what has allowed it to exist and co-exist. These do not change, the basic rhythms of the drum dudum-dudum, any day that change, it is the end of *Kumina*"), Phillip Supersad, 'Kumina Music.' Interview by Marsha M.Hall. Audio / visual recordings, (Kingston: African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/ Jamaica Memory Bank Archives, 2023).

²³ Bilby and Bunseki, 'Kumina: A Kongo-Based Tradition in the New World,' pp. 473-528.

communal healing and gathering of rhythmic sounds heard and felt by all. There is no doubt in the minds of adherents and scholars that *Kumina* music is quintessentially and inherently African.

What is striking is that the evolving interpretation of *Kumina* establishes it as a source of fascination for many people, whether they are listening to the music or witnessing the ritualised practice for the first time. An example of this can be found in the case of ethnomusicologist Marjorie Whyllie. When I spoke with her in 2023, she explained that her exposure to *Kumina* began as a child; at the time, she did not even know what it was, but she was absorbed by the drumming. As a result of this, growing up she attempted to play the rhythmic patterns every day.

Kumina reflects diverse voices within its ritualised social performances, from the *Bailo* expressed in Jamaican Creole, where the singing occurs during the early stages of the *Kumina* ceremony, mainly to attract spirits, and the *Country* songs in Kikongo, the language of the ancestors. Customarily, it is performed when the spirits appear, which are addressed with a 'salo', a deep curtsey towards the lead drum, the most immediate point of contact with the spirits,²⁴ and a sign of reverence to the spirits that speak through the wood and goatskin. The idea of language is not limited to speaking in human tongues but also refers to the 'language of the drum.' Each drum cadence speaks a language that is unique to it, but the drummer must simultaneously be able to transfer this to the dancers and evoke the spirits. Again, Supersad crafts a beautiful analogy between both the *Playing Kyas* and *Kbandu*. He likens the rhythmic sounds to conversations between a man and a woman. The steady four-beat pattern, Dudum-dudum-dudum-dudum!, is a very patient man saying "Yes dear, yes dear to soothe his wife," and the form of the *Playing Kyas* is a very staccato response bringing with 'her' a very rapid high-pitch sort of urgency—peng-peng-peng! Furthermore, drum rhythms affect your entire body and spirit, taking you to a higher plane. In what sounded like two people in a close waltz of love, Supersad recalls his interactions with drummers from the National Dance Theatre Company who played *Kumina* and the effect the music had on him: "it held on to me, it embraced me, and I embraced it back." The body takes up space during *Kumina*, with communication taking place between the dancers, the dancers and drummers, and the dancers and ancestors. The drummers must play *Kumina*, but their role is also critical to the dancers, who are not just symbolic figures. However, their safety—specifically during *Myaal*—is prioritised and this is where both *Kbandu* and *Playing Kyas* take centre stage. Since *Myaal* is a spirit-possession, the dancers are not immune to it and may therefore be possessed, which heightens their senses, leading them to dance away in something of a frenzy. With a blazing fire pit symbolic of purification, the drummers must play *Kumina* in a way that does not evoke unwelcomed spirits in the dancers, which may veer them towards the flames.

Playing Kyas / *Cyas* or the lead drum is where the most complex and unique beats are executed to appease the spirits. It is also dubbed the 'charmer drum,' and is known among *Kumina* practitioners for having the



Image: Courtesy of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/ Jamaica Memory Bank. *Kumina* music session in Spring Bank, St. Thomas. 27 February 2023.



Image: Courtesy of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/ Jamaica Memory Bank. Conversation with ethnomusicologist Ms Marjorie Whyllie, 24 February 2023.

²⁴ Jean E. Snnder, 'Kumina: The Energy of African Identity in Contemporary Jamaica,' p. 24.

ability to evoke the sound of a very stubborn, unyielding woman. It can be played either at the middle or around the rim to achieve different beats or points. Traditionally, the *Playing Kyas* drummers are held in high regard because they are adept at playing the various rhythms that summon, ward off, and pacify the numerous spirits. When choosing music, the queen takes on a similar role and frequently sings *Bailo* and *Country* songs in a call-and-response style (with the King/Captain of the *Bandz*). Different parts of the *Playing Kyas* emit different sounds. Some drummers play it in the belly, using their fingertips, flat and straight, while some bar the drum with their heel. These are indicative of diverse communicative styles that a player may choose to play at different times. However, a wise drummer on the *Playing Kyas* must remain focused to ensure that *Myaal* does not occur in certain spaces and reveal elements that were never planned for. Additionally, the *Playing Kyas* patterns appeal to different parts of the body, that is, the patterns that speak to the shoulder and the back showing movement from the waist up alongside other movements forward and backward.²⁵

It is the *Kbandu*, the male drum, that possesses an anchoring sound and holds a particular rhythm consistently, while keeping the body steady and the composure aligned. When the drums are played without background singing, that is when the drum begins to speak. The melody is so powerful that it eliminates the need for vocals from the gathering. "*Kwabu mambu, ngguma sita, Kbandu bwoy, mambu...*"—no singing should be heard, let the drum talk. To paraphrase Whitmore Simpson, a respected *Kumina* elder, having the right man on the drum is crucial to a good *Kumina*. He exclaims "*Kbandu Bwoy! Kbandu! Duguub. Dugub, Dugub!*", which can be translated as "Play *Kbandu* boy! *Kbandu*! Do good! Do good!" The *Kbandu* plays a steady four-beat pattern that varies in tone.

The communal and communicative expressions among *Kumina* adherents are veneration to their ancestors with various ritualised performances conveyed through the drums. In general, these are the instruments that communicate the ancestors' messages. Furthermore, as the drummers play, they must listen to the lead singers to convey whatever message is sent from the spirit world. While conducting fieldwork in 2023, Perry elaborated:

De drum speaks of course, nuff time we a play a Kumina an' we see seh a so it fi play, de' drum reveals secrets that others are not aware of, especially at dead yards, de drum is hard to dig out, there are drums that do not go to dead yard, these are for special works.²⁶

Of course, certain *Kumina* performances are not for public consumption, "For when a danca' get inna *Myaal*, dem wi all climb tree backway and throw demsef' inna fire."²⁷ Bearing all the above in mind, the drum does indeed possess a special language; these are the instruments that really speak to the ancestors and individuals, and they are played differently depending on the mood of the drummer. The musical drums in *Kumina* remain distinctive even with the blending and variations of rhythmic

²⁵ Marjorie Whyllie, 'Kumina Music.' Interviewed by Marsha M. Hall. Audio / visual recordings (Kingston: Milverton Crescent, Jamaica, 2023).

²⁶ Translation ("the drum speaks of course, many times we performing at Kumina sessions and we get a vision that this is how the drum should play, the drum reveals secrets that others are not aware of, especially at dead yards. The drum is hard to make, there are drums that do not go to dead yard, these are for special works"), Perry, 'Kumina' interview.

²⁷ Translation ("for when a dancer gets into Myaal, they will climb tree backway and throw themselves into fire"). Alexander, 'Kumina' interview.

patterns, the body movements of the dancers, and any gestures during *Kumina* rituals. There has been some deviation in the music of *Kumina* in recent years, but not by 'true practitioners.' The popular sound system generally reserved for dancehall spaces is seen strung up at Dead Yards and *Kumina* musicians must contend with the blaring sounds of speaker boxes and pop music. For example, between 2003 and 2016, numerous reggae music producers started a musical trend experimenting with *Kumina* rhythms and eventually voicing reggae artistes on what was dubbed "*Kumina* Riddim, with song titles "*Kumina* Rock," and "Dance *Kumina*."²⁸ This sleuth of 'riddims' (rhythms) hit the airwaves and blared out over speaker boxes, much to the delight of the dancehall masses.²⁹ The interplay of a hybridised *Kumina* music and dancehall lyrics marketed in commercial recordings and live performances won over scores of listeners and re-introduced '*Kumina*' to mainstream culture to a certain extent.

Conclusions

The more things change, the more they remain the same, and in terms of its celebratory role, *Kumina* is still not viewed as "a wholesome representation of Jamaican culture, but it is a part of it."³⁰ However, stigmas associated with the practice hold negative connotations. Yet we should note that, in the same manner as we are tolerant of other religions, we must understand the Kongolese religious beliefs from which *Kumina* stems."³¹ On a positive note, the few remaining practitioners are still enthusiastic and eager to find any opportunity to share real knowledge about *Kumina*. Some are weary and tired of interviews, however, particularly since there is no monetary payment on the institute's part. During my observations, I noted that some *Kumina* practitioners also suffered from "research fatigue," which occurs when often marginalised, minority, and/or Indigenous groups are repeatedly approached, surveyed, questioned, and incorporated into research projects to share part of their understanding of their culture. The power balances and positive gains of such a process are often unequal, since the research benefits the researcher but not the local community, leading participants to feel weary and disinclined towards further involvement.³²

While the interviewees were very receptive towards my calls and emails, once I entered the communities, practitioners and adherents would begin to express their real concerns to me, such as the lack of governmental and even institutional support. That aside, *Kumina* also acts as a unifying force given the different ways in which it can be used for family unification or as an annual practice to celebrate ancestors—some of these practices are still alive in the parish. So, it is not necessarily always about death when *Kumina* is played. While an air of mystery remains around *Kumina*, little attention been paid to its preservation; more attention is necessary, and this is where the government and institutions must partner to safeguard this Afro-Jamaican cultural legacy. This paper, whose aim has been to reconsider *Kumina*, is not a reworking of stellar research already carried out in the area. Rather, it is intended to generate useful pillars for culturally engaging communities with a fresh perspective. More than a *Tik-Tok*



Image: Courtesy of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/ Jamaica Memory Bank. From right to left: researcher Marsha M. Hall, interview with *Kumina* practitioners: Lenroy Alexander 'Bongo Shut' in the middle; and Toyloy 'Kofi' Nugent, 27 February 2023.

²⁸ *Dance Kumina Riddim* - Shocking Vibes Records / Beat Ruut 2003. *Riddim World*. (December 2019), <https://riddimsworld.com/2003-riddims/2003-reggae/kumina-riddim/>.

²⁹ *Kumina Riddim-Free Flow Record*. *Riddim World* (January 2021), <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9508&context=etd>.

³⁰ Nicholas Allen, '*Kumina*.' Interviewed by Marsha M.Hall. Audio/ visual recordings (Kingston: University of the West Indies Medical Faculty, Mona Campus, Kingston, Jamaica, 2022).

³¹ Laura Tanna, '*Kumina: The Kongo Connection*,' pp. 468-472.

³² Ilona Kater, '*Natural and Indigenous Sciences: Reflections on an Attempt to Collaborate*.'

aesthetic and tautology of social media, *Kumina* cannot be individualised; it depends heavily on collective memory and every aspect of the ritualised performances are synchronised. The onus is on scholars to reduce the public biases and pressure on practitioners to conform, bearing in mind that researchers are novices in the field, so they must place a heavy reliance on *Kumina* practitioners and adherents to obtain accurate information and understand the concerns about their community. If there is anything authentic in this country, it is *Kumina*.

³³ Anonymous informant, 'Kumina Dance' (Kingston, Vineyard Town, 2023).



Images: Courtesy of the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/ Jamaica Memory Bank.



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