

Nof Afrikan, Wan Jamiekan

The Foundation of Jamaican Culture

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*So wai dem tiich bout kolombos
Dey duohn tiich Muozaya Gyaavi in skuul
A propaganda dem spreadin'
Ay wonda uu dem tingk dem a fuul¹*

— Daweh Congo, “Study Garvey” (1997)

“So why dem teach about Columbus
Dey don’t teach Mosiah Garvey in school
A propaganda dem spreadin’
I wonda’ who dem think dem a fool”²

Jamaica is an island in the Western Caribbean whose culture is rooted in Afrika as reflected by its majority Afrikan population,³ but the Afrikan culture is suppressed by the Eurocentric institutional arrangement which is rooted in the colonial context in which the nation was founded. On May 5th, 1494, christopher columbus was the first european to arrive in

¹ The essay follows the orthography established by UWI Mona’s Jamaican Language Unit.

² This is an anglocentric spelling of the Jamaican language.

³ This author, given his Afrocentric disposition, treats Afrikan and Black as synonyms and, moreover, assumes Jamaican to be a Caribbean-Afrikan, i.e. Black, ethnicity. All non-Afrikan, i.e. non-black, presences in Jamaica are non-Jamaican by default.

Jamaica.⁴ The colombus day holiday in Jamaica reflects the that colonial imprint on the island, not that of the Afrikan story – as noted by Jamaican reggae artist Daweh Congo. In 1509, the formalized european colonial enterprise in Jamaica began when the spaniards sought the island for their colonial interests. When the spanish invaded Jamaica, they encountered the Arawaks, the indigenous group of the island. Due to the genocidal activities of the spanish colonists, the Arawaks were extinct by the early part of the 17th century. It is often said that the name Jamaica is derived from the Arawak name Xaymaca “land of wood and water”, a nickname used today. However, recent evidence suggests an Afrikan origin for the name Jamaica. More specifically, the Twi phrase *Gyama ya ka ha* meaning “we are stuck here”.⁵

The Afrikan story of Jamaica begins in 1513 with the enslaved Afrikans that were brought as servants for the spanish colonists, but climaxes after the british take over the island in 1655. When the british captured the island, the Afrikans fled to the mountains and became the foundational population for the self-sufficient Afrikan communities on the island, commonly referred to as “marrons”. In fact, the term maroon derives from the spanish expression *cimarron* “fugitive, wild” which was used by the enslavers to describe the Afrikans that escaped and lived outside of the plantation.⁶ This terminology, however, undermines the nation-building thrust of these communities. Consequently, this author uses the term *Kilombo* as an umbrella term, while using the ethnic names for specific *Kilombo* communities. The independent Afrikan community of Palmares in Brazil was described as a *Kilombo*, a Bantu word for “war camp”, which speaks to the context of resistance in which these diasporic nations were formed. Among the *Kilombo*,

⁴ Given the colonial nature of their endeavors, european figures and names are not capitalized.

⁵ Ghana Broadcasting Corporation 2013.

⁶ For further analysis, see Brathwaite 1994, Kent 1996, Manigat 1977.

the *Kromanti* of Jamaica are the most notorious for their resistance against the British, but also their complex relationship with the enslaved Afrikans on the plantation.

The explosion of the Afrikan population on the island in the 18th century resulted from the British interest in the sugar industry which was dependent on the enslavement of Afrikans. Initially, the British brought enslaved Afrikans from neighboring Barbados, but as the European enslavement system grew the British brought more Continental Afrikans. The majority of Continental Afrikans brought to Jamaica came from 'Gold Coast' (now modern-day Ghana), Bight of Benin, and Bight of Biafra. In the mid-19th century, Kongo and Yoruba peoples came to Jamaica as indentured laborers. Overall, the major continental ethnicities that formed the foundation of the Jamaican population include Akan, Bantu, Ewe, Fula, Igbo, Jola, Wolof, Yoruba.⁷ Therefore, Jamaican identity is a Pan-Afrikan ethnicity created and developed in a Caribbean geographic and socio-historical context.

Although some Afrikan institutional arrangements were severely suppressed in economic and political arenas, but we can see cultural transformation and continuity of Afrika in several areas, such as spirituality, music, and language. There are two ways that spirituality of Afrika is present: (1) Afrikan spiritual systems and (2) continuities or transformations of individual practices and rituals from Continental Afrikan systems. Afrikan spiritual communities in Jamaica include the spiritual system of the *Kromanti* and *Kumina*.⁸ There are rituals or practices that were assimilated into general Christian practices of Jamaicans or hybridized Christian sects, such as Revival Zion and Pukumania. There are, however, individual practices and rituals that exist independently. For example, *obiya* 'obeah', a direct continentalism concept, refers to the conjuring of spiritual forces to assist individuals for healing, protection, and/or other personal

⁷ For further discussion, see Alleyne 1988.

⁸ For further discussion, see Alleyne 1988, Davy 2016, Stewart 2018.

endeavors, i.e. *wok obiya* “to do obeah”. The *obya* system is often ridiculed in Jamaican society as witchcraft, e.g. *bad lok wos dan obya* “bad luck is worst than being attacked by obeah”, but also understood to be practiced in private. The public stigmatization of *obya* by the Afrikan population is a result of the “obeah laws” that the British instituted in order to curb the Afrikan rebellions on the island and, moreover, the general eurocentric indoctrination via Christianization.

Music & dance form is the most noted form of the Afrikaness of Jamaican culture. Instruments that frequent Jamaican music are drums, string instruments, and the Kromanti flute of the *Kromanti Afro-Nation*. Although European instruments were added, it is important to keep in mind that they are blended and styled on Afrikan terms in Jamaican music. Jamaican song and dance involve call ‘n’ response and circular motions, respectively, which reflect the holistic and interconnected way of thinking in the Afrikan worldview. For example, the *wain* ‘wine’ is a dance between men and women that is a visual metaphor of the complementary dynamic between the masculine and feminine elements of (pro)creation. Enslaved Afrikans sang work songs and they also made songs with social commentary which became a frequent feature of Jamaican music. Mento, a classic Jamaican genre, is predominated by social commentary with songs. Reggae and Dancehall, two intertwined genres, are rich in social and political commentary, though the latter is often underrated in this respect.⁹

The Jamaican language is an Ebonics language, i.e. an Afrikan contact language. Ebonics, though often associated with the language of Afrikan-Americans, is an umbrella term for Afrikan languages created in situations of language contact.¹⁰ The hybridity concepts often applied to Afrikan contact languages – such as creole, patois, pidgin, and vernacular – reduce to

⁹ For an excellent analysis of social commentary in Dancehall, see Cooper 1994.

¹⁰ Ebonics concept was coined by Afrikan American psychologist Robert Williams (1997) who initially used this term to refer to the Afrikan contact languages of the Afrikan diaspora. Others have expanded the concept to include the contact languages on the Afrikan continent, such as Carol Blackshire-Belay (1996) and Kimani Nehusi (2001).

these languages as Black remixes of European language on the basis of lexical borrowing, while the Ebonics concept centers the Afrikan creativity that informs these languages. In the Caribbean, the grammar and phonology from the various Niger-Congo speakers were blended and the lexicons of European languages were readapted to the Ebonics languages we hear today in the Caribbean.

[W]e African ancestors pop we English forefahders-dem. Yes! Pop dem an disguise up de English language fi project fi dem African Language in such a way dat we English forefathers-dem still couldn't understan what we African ancestors-dem wasa talk bout when dem wasa talk to dem one anodder!¹¹

“The British enslavers didn’t want our Afrikan ancestors to speak their languages, but our ancestors tricked them! They found a way to speak in an Afrikan way through English words. In doing so, the enslavers still couldn’t understand what our ancestors were saying to each other.” (Author’s Translation)

The enslaved Afrikans of Jamaica, as Jamaican folklorist Miss Lou (Louise Bennett) explains, repurposed the English lexicon on Afrikan terms. Two strong examples of this Ebonicization are lexical continentalisms and grammar. The term lexical continentalism refers to words or expressions from indigenous Afrikan languages that were transferred into the Jamaican language. There are two types of lexical continentalisms – direct and relexified. The Jamaican pronoun *unu* “y’all” is a direct transfer from the Igbo language, while the expression *yai waata* “tears” is a relexified version of related Niger-Congo phrases, like *anya mmiri* (Igbo) and *anisuo* (Akan), which literally translate to “eye water”. The grammatical base of the Jamaican language, as noted previously, is Niger-Congo with a predominant influence from the Akan language.¹² One such example is sequential verbs. For example, the Akan expression *Sankofa* “run back and fetch it” is a verb chain that can be translated as *gwaan go bring (it) bak* in Jamaican which retains

¹¹ Bennett 2005: 2. Emphasis added. The text uses the Cassidy spelling system.

¹² See Alleyne 1980, 1988.

the verb sequence. Evidently, though the Jamaican language had extensive borrowing from the English lexicon, the *riddim* of the language is clearly Afrikan. In short, the Jamaican language is an Afrikan language created in a Caribbean socio-historical context.

Jamaican culture shows how the Caribbean is essentially a geographic extension of Afrikan culture. Jamaican spirituality, be it spiritual systems, religions, or isolated practices/rituals, cannot be understood outside of an Afrikan context. The Music and Dance in Jamaica shows how Afrikan culture transforms and perpetuates itself in a Caribbean setting. The repurposing and readaptation of Niger-Congo language in the Jamaican language is a testament to the creativity and resilience of Afrikan people. Consequently, the current “out of many one people” must be understood as part of the colonial propaganda that reinforces Eurocentric indoctrination in the island. A corrective motto for Jamaica would be – *Nof Afrikan, Wan Jamiaka* “Many Afrikan people, One Jamaica” – which speaks to the Afrikanness of Jamaican people.

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