

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4231



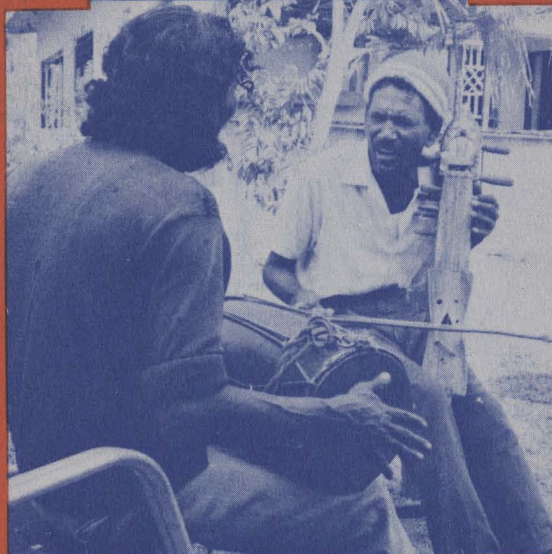
Bongo, Backra & Coolie

Jamaican Roots

VOLUME 1

Kumina and Convince, Jamaican East Indian Music

Recorded by K. M. Bilby



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SIDE 1

KUMINA AND CONVINCING

Band 1 King Zombie

Band 2 Asosowata

Band 3 Since Me Dead and Gone

Band 4 Bembalay

Band 5 Do Do

SIDE 2

Band 1 King Zya/John Fraser

Band 2 Country Song ?

HINDUSTANI MUSIC

Band 3 Dance Music 1

Band 4 Dance Music 2

Band 5 Dance Music 3

Band 6 Dance Music 4

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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Bongo, Backra & Coolie Jamaican Roots

Introduction and Notes by Kenneth M. Bilby

Jamaica is a small island by some standards, and it comprises one of the smaller nations of the world. Yet a great deal of variety exists in the folklore and music of this island. The folk of present-day Jamaica are the result of a fascinating cultural and racial mixture, and much of the island provides a virtual laboratory for the study of acculturation and cultural syncretism. Although rapid industrialization and the tourist industry are causing changes in many areas of Jamaica, many folk practices continue to thrive. In many areas, rural folk music co-exists with the urban reggae of the ubiquitous juke box; the advent of the latter has not necessarily led to the death of the former.

The word "bongo" is Jamaican creole dialect, and in its general usage refers to a person who exhibits traits, both physical and cultural, which are thought to be African-derived. The great majority of present-day Jamaicans are descended, at least partially, from the West Africans and Central Africans who were brought to the island as slaves by the English between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The amount of African cultural elements which have survived in Jamaica has been the subject of much debate over the years. Leaving aside the dubious issue of "cultural purity," there is no doubt that several African cultures have influenced the cultural admixture which is found in modern Jamaica. Such influence has been documented and can be seen in the language, some of the religions, much of the music, and many of the folkways of Jamaicans.

"Backra" is creole dialect meaning a white person, or a person who appears to be of pure European descent. A tiny minority of the present Jamaican population would qualify to be called by this term. However, Jamaican culture owes much to European, primarily British, cultures (aside from English, Scottish, and Irish influences, there has been some French and Spanish influence, probably from Haiti and Cuba). Although Europeans have always been in the minority in Jamaica, European culture (predominantly English) is the main ingredient in the Jamaican cultural admixture. This can of course be attributed largely to the conditions of inequality concomitant to a slavocracy: generally, slaves were taught or forced to repudiate their own cultures, and to place a premium upon the culture of their enslavers. Over three hundred years of English colonial rule has left its indelible mark on Jamaican culture.

The folk music of Britain has influenced much of Jamaican folk music. Yet it is precisely in this cultural domain that cultural exchange seems to have been somewhat more even. Even in instances in which melody or form is directly traceable to England, the rendition is always very Jamaican in flavor. In music such as quadrille music or John Canoe music, this "flavor" would seem to owe much to African-derived rhythmic attitudes.

"Coolie" refers to a person of East Indian descent. Another word which is commonly used, regardless of the person's religion, is "Hindu-

stani." Today there is a substantial minority of such people in Jamaica, most of whom are descended from East Indians who came to Jamaica as indentured laborers to work on sugar estates between 1860 and 1917. This flow of Indian laborers occurred largely in response to the dearth of labor caused by the end of slavery. East Indian culture has not made much impact on general Jamaican culture, but many East Indian Jamaicans have retained parts of East Indian culture while undergoing creolization. There has been some cultural exchange; for instance, in some areas East Indians have taken up John Canoe dancing, and have created their own unique costumes to go with it.

The music of the East Indians appears to have remained quite separate from other Jamaican traditions. In some areas the Hussay Festival, a Mohammedan festival from Bombay, is still held. It has been speculated that East Indian music has exerted a slight influence on other Jamaican music, which can be seen in the length and form of melodic lines. This remains to be investigated.

The largest centers of East Indian population are to be found in the western parish of Westmoreland, and in the eastern coastal parishes.

Outlined above are the three general traditions which have contributed to Jamaican folk music, in either separate or more syncretic forms. Some Jamaican folk music has basically African roots, some has basically European roots, and some has basically East Indian roots. And, finally, much Jamaican folk music is the result of a blending of these.

Jamaica also contains several other much smaller minority populations, such as Chinese, Jewish, Syrian, and Lebanese. The culture of the masses has been little affected by any of these. These minorities have tended to remain separate from the general population, and some of them retain customs which have not been absorbed by other segments of the population. The East Indians, however, have more often mixed and inter-married with Jamaican blacks, and in some parishes have spread their influence. Several originally Afro-Jamaican religious cults have been known to incorporate East Indian dialect into their services, and East Indian spirits into their pantheons.



Special thanks to Kitty Spence of New York for generous help; and to Mr. Percy Tennent of St. Ann's Bay, for making these recordings possible.

KUMINA AND CONVINCE

Recorded in St. Catherine

Kumina is a magico-religious cult with strong African roots (probably primarily Angola-Congo) found mainly in the eastern parishes of Jamaica. The cult draws its members mainly from the rural peasantry of this region. Typically, a Kumina meeting includes singing, drumming, dancing and spirit possession.

Each Kumina group usually has a male leader called the "captain," who often plays one of the drums, and a female leader called the "Kumina Queen." Each Kumina captain is trained by a previous Kumina captain over a period of years, and is required to learn the drumbeats, feeding habits, dances, and methods of controlling large numbers of spirits. There is much use of call-and-response between the captain and/or Kumina Queen and the other members of the cult. Usually only two drums are played, the larger called the "kbandu," and the smaller called the "playing cast." Both drums are single-headed, the heads are made of goat-skin, and the frames are made from hollowed-out tree trunks or refashioned kegs. They are played in a horizontal position, while the players sit on top of them and press their heels against the heads to modify the pitches. The kbandu tends to play a basic underlying rhythm around which the playing cast improvises. Kumina groups also often include home-made tin scrapers, gourd rattles, percussive sticks, and clapping, which all contribute to the polyrhythmic texture of the music. Some groups also make use of a "bass trumpet," a large section of bamboo or metal pipe through which rhythmic patterns are blown. Harmony in the music is incidental, and when it occurs, it often consists of parallel thirds, or parallel fifths.

Kumina songs are of two general types, "bailo" and "country" (also called "African"). The former are sung in Jamaican creole dialect; the latter combine nonsense syllables with Congolese words, and, on rare occasions, a bit of English. Bailo songs are songs of invocation, used for calling zombies or gods to a meeting. Country songs are sung mainly after a large number of cult members have become possessed.

Three kinds of spirits are involved in possessions at Kumina ceremonies: "sky gods," "earthbound gods," and "ancestral zombies." Most of the gods are said to have their own songs for calling them, and also to have their own particular drumbeats or rhythmic patterns which are played during invocation. This is not true for most zombies.

The strongest powers among these three kinds of spirits are the sky gods, who come to watch at ceremonies, as well as to possess cult members. There is a large pantheon of sky gods (often called "African gods"); King Zombie, Jubee, Faha, and Sango are four such sky gods. There are many more. Joseph Moore (Ph. D. Dissertation in Anthropology, Northwestern University, 1953) has collected and listed the names of ninety-nine Kumina gods, thirty-seven of which are sky gods. Individuals possessed by sky gods are said to do such things as climb up poles or trees backward, without any hands, and slide back down head first; or they are said to sometimes fly to the tops of trees to walk about on flimsy branches that "wouldn't hold a bird." At other times sky gods are said to knock drummers onto the ground and to possess the drums so that the drumming continues when the drummers are no longer playing.

The earthbound gods are somewhat less powerful than the sky gods, being bound to the earth and unable to leave it. These gods come and possess at Kumina ceremonies. They are also used in private workings of the obeah man (obeah is a form of magic stemming from West Africa, still practiced widely in Jamaica). The pantheon of the earthbound gods is also very large, and includes a hodge-podge of unique names such as Macoo and Kachee, and common first names such as Percy or Dorothy.

The ancestral zombies are spirits of deceased members of families belonging to the cult. They are responsible for the greatest number of possessions at a Kumina meeting. Although they are considered the least powerful of all three types, a few of them become extremely strong and are considered as powerful as earthbound gods. A very few, especially the ancestral heads of extended families, surpass the earthbound gods and are given their own songs. As one would expect, ancestral zombies have common Jamaican names such as Maria Miller, William Scott, John Fraser.

Types of possession vary according to the god or zombie which is possessing. Some people claim that they can tell immediately which god is possessing a person by the manner in which possession occurs. Although possession almost always occurs through the ground, traveling from the feet to the rest of the body (even the sky gods apparently travel through the ground after "coming down"), some spirits hit a person down, or cause a person to kick and flail about on the ground, while others are more gentle.

Those possessed by particular sky gods or earthbound gods dance in distinctive styles which help cult members to identify the god which is possessing a person at any one time. Aside from these dances, there are group dances. Ring dances are common. The dancing which the writer observed was patterned in this way: the dancers formed themselves into two circles, one inside the other. The drummers were enclosed by the circles, and the outside circle moved counter-clockwise, while the inside circle moved clockwise. In those dances which include only one ring, the movement is always counter-clockwise.

Kumina ceremonies sometimes include sacrifices of goats or chickens and the ritual offering of blood to feed the gods and zombies. Offerings of food or drink are usual. One such offering which the writer observed was the sprinkling of rum on the ground before a song, and the sprinkling of rum on the drums.

Kumina cults have been associated mainly with wakes and memorial ceremonies. However, members of the cult observed by the writer said that they hold a meeting almost every night of the week. This indicates that the practices of the cult have wider applications, and that the cult yet flourishes as a living religion in some parts of the island.

Convince is a magico-religious cult found only in the eastern parishes of Jamaica. Its membership is based upon association rather than kinship. Convince deals exclusively with possession by ghosts (called "duppies" or "jumbies" in Jamaica); there is no pantheon of gods as in Kumina.

Convince is said to have originated among the Maroons in the Blue Mountains of eastern Jamaica. The Maroons are the descendants of slaves who escaped into the Blue Mountains between the

sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and founded their own communities. The British never truly conquered the Maroons; after many attempts at such, they granted the Maroons partial political autonomy in 1739. The present-day Maroons are believed by other Jamaicans to possess the most "African" customs on the island.

Indeed, many of the powerful duppies in Convince (called specifically "bongo ghosts") are said to come from Africa, while others are the ghosts of ancient Jamaican slaves. Members of Convince cults know of the existence of Kumina, Revival Zion, and other cults, but they claim that bongo ghosts have no dealings with any other spirits.

Convince meetings are most usually held as memorial services for deceased cult members. Special sacrificial ceremonies are also held annually. Other ceremonies are held to help individuals in personal pursuits, or to propitiate offended bongo ghosts.

Convince music never makes use of drums, but only singing, clapping, and sometimes percussive sticks. Songs are sung either entirely in chorus or in leader-and-chorus style. In the latter style, the chorus repeats the same phrase over and over, in between which the leader improvises line after line. Songs are sung in Jamaican creole dialect; however, when possession occurs, many words which cult members believe to be "African" are used.

The examples of Convince music which are on this record are especially interesting because they were recorded at a meeting of the same Kumina group which is heard on this record. This group had incorporated Convince music into its ceremonies; this indicates that it might also have incorporated bongo ghosts into its pantheon, in spite of the claim of Convince cult members that bongo ghosts never mix with other spirits.

Thus, the examples of Convince music on this record are somewhat unusual. The captain of the Kumina group used the word "convince" to refer to the style of singing without drums which his group uses alongside bailo and country. Whether or not the influence of the Convince cult on Kumina groups goes deeper than this is not known by the writer. Nor is it known at this time how common this kind of interchange between Convince and Kumina is.

Kumina and Convince (names spelled phonetically)

A. King Zombie - (kbandu, playing cast, scraper, rattle) - This appears to be a country song. King Zombie is one of the sky gods who are said to cause possessed individuals to do such things as climb up poles or trees backwards.

B. Asosowata - (kbandu, playing cast, scraper, rattle, bass trumpet) - This appears to be a bailo song.

C. Since me dead an' gone - (singing and clapping) - This is an example of Convince music, sung in Jamaican creole dialect. Some of the lines are as follows:

Since me dead an' gone,
When me was a living jumby man,
Cock never crow on me yard,
Cock never crow on me grave,
Him was a walk jumby walk,
Him was a talk jumby talk,
Him was a country tune become,
When me was a living bongo man,
Cock never crow on me yard,
Cock never crow on me grave,
Jumby never touch on me grave,
Jumby never walk on me grave,
Duppy never walk on me yard, etc.

"Jumby" and "duppy" are both creole words meaning "ghost" or "spirit."

D. Bembalay - (kbandu, playing cast, scraper, rattle, sticks, clapping) - This appears to be another example of bailo. "Bembalay" might possibly be another god. Possession sounds can be heard towards the end, as well as shouts of "obeah!"

E. Do Do - (singing, clapping, sticks) - This is another Convince song. The chorus of "Do Do" might be related to the Congolese word "Ntoto," which has been used in Kumina country songs and means "Earth."

F. King Zya/John Fraser - (kbandu, playing cast, scraper, rattle, sticks) - This appears to be a country song. King Zya is probably another one of the sky gods, while John Fraser is probably a very powerful ancestral zombie. Possession sounds can be heard throughout, as well as shouts of "Kumina," "music Congo," or "obeah."

G. ---- (kbandu, playing cast, scraper, rattle, clapping, bass trumpet) - This is probably a country song also. It is hard to distinguish the words, but one of them might be "Ayedi," which is the name of a god in certain Congo cults in Africa.

Hindustani Music

The pieces on this record are meant to be danced to. They were sung in what was called by the performers the "Hindu language." The performers did not understand any of this language but a few fragments, and thus could not offer any information on the meaning of the texts of these pieces.

EAST INDIAN MUSIC

Recorded in St. Catherine

East Indians in Jamaica have tended to intermarry with Jamaican blacks (whom they often call "negers") more than have other minority groups. Yet they have managed to retain some of their customs with little change. Although the coolies are fluent in Jamaican creole dialect, other Jamaicans claim that they also speak an "Indian" dialect which only they can understand. It is said that when a coolie man wishes to insult another Jamaican without causing a fuss, he swears at him in the "Indian language" and most other coolies know what he means; of course most other Jamaicans do not understand a thing he has said.

The writer was told that the pieces of coolie music which he recorded were sung in the "Hindu language." Yet the people who performed them said later that they could understand only a very few fragments of this language.

The singer uses a very nasal tone, which tends to be found in the art music of India more often than in the folk music.

The instrument heard in these recordings is called in Jamaica the "Indian fiddle"; it is a hand-made folk instrument which bears resemblance to both the sarangi and sarinda of India. It has three main strings, plus several sympathetic strings, and the bottom part is covered with goat-skin. It is played in a vertical position, and rested between the legs. The strings are stopped with the finger nails rather than the finger tips.

The tabla drum used in these recordings is a home-made instrument, a folk rendition of the instrument used in India (Jamaican coolies still call it "tabla"). The two goat-skin heads are fastened by means of adjacent sections of rope which are passed through metal rings. As the

rings are slid up the frame the sections of rope are drawn together, tightening the heads. The frame is made from a hollowed piece of cedar. The small handbells used in these recordings were called by the musicians "manjari."

The music on this record is meant to accompany dancing. The musicians, especially the singer (who also plays the "fiddle"), as well as the dancers, make much use of stylized facial expressions and gesticulations with the hands.

It is not uncommon to find black Jamaicans who have been brought up or "adopted" by East Indians, and who have learned a good deal about coolie music. Nor is it uncommon to find black Jamaicans who have married East Indians and have learned much about coolie music from their in-laws. As a matter of fact, on some of the selections on this record the manjari are played by a black Jamaican who married a coolie woman and was taught many coolie songs by his brother-in-law.

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