



Cariso!

The Newsletter of the
Alton Augustus Adams
Music Research Institute

WINTER 2005

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Christmas with the Ancestors

Jonkonnu and Related Festivities in Jamaica

BY DR. KENNETH BILBY

IN MANY PARTS OF JAMAICA, music and dance serve as a means of establishing and maintaining contact with ancestors. In the more clearly African-derived religious traditions, such as Kumina and the Kromanti religion of the Maroons, specific songs and drum rhythms can be used to call the spirits of family members, who remain a part of the community even after physical death.

Throughout Jamaica, Christmas is a time of merriment and celebration. In some communities, it is also a time for paying respects to ancestors, who may be invited to join in the festivities. Two festival traditions associated with Christmas in Jamaica are Jonkonnu and Buru. Jonkonnu, the better known of the two, was once practiced on slave plantations and in towns across the island and goes back at least to the eighteenth century. Involving feasting, parading, masking, drumming, singing, and dancing, Jonkonnu was the closest thing in Jamaica to the pre-Lenten carnivals held in predominantly Catholic parts of the Americas, such as Trinidad, Brazil, and Louisiana. The lesser-known tradition called Buru appears to be historically related to Jonkonnu. It too features drumming, dancing, singing, street processions, and in some cases, masking.

Both traditions have played an important role in the island's cultural life in recent times—Jonkonnu because it has been

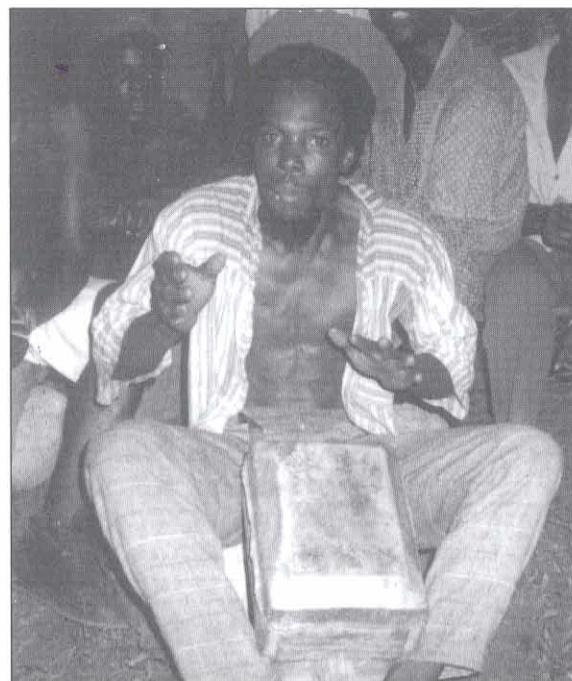


FIGURE 1. *Gumbay drum, played in Jonkonnu festivities in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica. Photo courtesy of Kenneth Bilby*

promoted by the Jamaican government as a symbol of national identity and Buru because its drumming (which is distinct from that of Jonkonnu) was one of the main sources of Nyabinghi, a new genre of Rastafarian traditional music that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century. Through the work of Bob Marley and other influential Rastafarian musicians, Nyabinghi contributed heavily to the development of urban popular music in Jamaica. Today, like reggae, it is played by Rastafarians around the world (*continued on 2*)

New AMRI Hours

NEW HOURS have been established for the office of the Alton Augustus Adams Music Research Institute. It will be open on Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

