Since the beginning of slavery, Africans in Jamaica were brought together under duress. Many stayed together, creating creolized communities encompassing a variety of ethnic African communities, and generation after generation, nation-building was imperative for Africans in Jamaica who sought to preserve their connection to Africa. Accordingly, Maroons fought against slavery and formed communities of their own, and Kumina groups grew as the Kongo/Bongo Nation banded together. Both Rastafari, which began in the 1930s, and dancehall beginning in the 1980s, have become ever-challenging factions of Jamaican society. Nonetheless, each group grows and stands as testament to the vestiges of African cultural forms. Kumina, Rastafari and dancehall, for example, represent their own forms of cultural marronage, but Maroons are included as part of this lineage because they set the pace for marronage as a successful form of rebellion in Jamaica.

“The facts of history—and therefore of the culture created by the [Jamaican] people themselves—have served to reaffirm the staying power of dance as part of a society’s ancestral and existential reality.”\(^1\) This study aims to identify at least one cultural lineage in Jamaican dance from West and Central Africa to Jamaica. The author proposes here that the Koromantee Dance and Kumina were transplanted to Jamaica along with enslaved Africans as part of their culture. The specific African cultural retentions recognized here are religion, music and dance. Above all, the late Jamaican educator/choreographer/writer Rex Nettleford adds: “… the dance in Jamaica continues to be one of the most effective means of communication, revealing many profound truths about complex social forces operative in a society grouping

toward both material and spiritual betterment.” This abstract from the larger work, will introduce “K”ongo or “C”ongo, the Bakongo people, the Jamaican Bongo/Kongo Nation, and offer a glimpse into further research.

“K”ongo or “C”ongo and Bakongo People

Historically, it is the Central African Angola/Kongo people who were transplanted to Jamaica as the Kongo/Bongo Nation. Unlike the Akan/Asante, the origin of the population within the Angola/Kongo nation has been questioned because of the inclusion of non-Kongo peoples as part of the colonial entity called the Belgian Congo. This mixing has shifted the surety of the nation group. The art historian Robert Farris Thompson explains:

Spelling Kongo with a K instead of a C, Africanist distinguish Kongo civilization and the Bakongo people from the colonial entity called the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) and the present-day People’s Republic of Congo-Brazzaville, both of which include numerous non-Kongo peoples. Traditional Kongo civilization encompasses modern Bas-Zaire and neighboring territories in modern Cabinda, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, and northern Angola. The Punu people of Gabon, the Teke of Congo-Brazzaville, the Suku and the Yaksa of the Kwango River area east of Kongo in Zaire, and some of the ethnic groups of northern Angola share key cultural and religious concepts with the Bakongo and also suffered, with them, the ordeals of the transatlantic slave trade.³

To give further light to these ascribed names Thompson adds: “The slavers of the early 1500s first applied the name ‘Kongo’ solely to the Bakongo people. Then gradually they used the

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name to designate any person brought from the west coast of Central Africa to America.\textsuperscript{4} Where the spelling of Congo with a “C” is concerned, Warner-Lewis in her definitive book on Central African’s cultural transformations, \textit{Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures}, states simply, “Congo’ became an omnibus term for several peoples of Central Africa.”\textsuperscript{5}

The Kongo peoples migrated to their current location during the 13\textsuperscript{th} century from the northeast under the leadership of Wene. In 1482 the Portuguese arrived on the coast, and the BaKongo began diplomatic relations which included sending BaKongo nobles to visit the royal assemblage in Portugal in 1485. Bakongo leaders were targeted for conversion by Christian missionaries, and often divisions between followers of Christianity and followers of the traditional religions which centers on ancestor and spirit worship resulted. In 1526 the Portuguese were expelled, but the BaKongo peoples were then invaded by the Jagas in 1568, resultantly and ironically, the BaKongo were forced to look to the Portuguese for help. At that time,

The Portuguese were also intent on discovering silver mines, but by 1605 slave capture by the Portuguese army was given priority over the search for the elusive metal. By the early decades of the seventeenth century the Portuguese succeeded in imposing upon the \textit{Mbundu} a form of indirect rule through a puppet king of Portuguese choice. In 1671 they deposed the king and began building a fort at the coastal town of Luanda. Thus \textit{Ndongo} became the first African colony of a European state. The following years brought wars and the gradual

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid, 103
\textsuperscript{5} Maureen Warner-Lewis, \textit{Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures} (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), p. 15
subjugation of the territory to which the Portuguese would give the umbrella designation of Angola.\(^6\)

The once powerful Kongo Kingdom, as subjugation for territory by the Portuguese mounted, never regained its former power, and in the ensuing years, the BaKongo alternatively fought for and against the Portuguese, eventually being colonized in 1885.

The BaKongo anthropologist Fu-Kian Kia-Bunseki offers the following line of reasoning to help bring light to the BaKongo people’s living culture; their indigenous beginning that was transplanted along with them to the New World. He writes:

Drumming, singing, and dancing are a source of inspiration, energy and joy. Kongo people drum, sing and dance to raise their families with the balance provided by the sound of music. They drum, sing and dance to mourn their dead; they drum, sing and dance to strengthen their institutions. Furthermore, Africans drum, sing and dance because ‘Life itself is a perpetual melody.’ (Zingu kiau-kiben i kumu diakwama). They produce music, and enjoy it, to be in peace with themselves, nature, and with the universe as well. Drumming, singing and dancing perform a powerful ‘spiritual medicine’ (n’kisi) that helps one to excel at work, at war, even under oppression.\(^7\)

\(^{6}\) Ibid., p. 5

The BaKongo and the Jamaican Bongo/Kongo Nation

When the Act for the Abolition of Slave Trade was passed in 1807 and later the abrupt end of the period of Apprenticeship in 1838, Jamaican sugar planters began to face serious crisis for laborers. The Apprenticeship system began in 1834 and was conceived as a transitional period for freed people to work for their former owners for 40 ½ hours per week without payment. If they did work past the 40 ½ hours, it was however possible to negotiate individual payment. At this time of remonstration by abolitionists, there was also “… the search for new items of trade and new missionary initiatives, all of which increased the European presence.” Then, “From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century…slave trading had become the principal basis of the economy along the West Central African coast and in its hinterland. [And] a change from this [gainful] economic system was therefore not easy to implement.” As a result, because of a lean supply of free labor, West Indian and other New World planters sought cheap labor to work their plantations. In fact, the Jamaican Government requested a recruitment of Africans from the Colonial Secretary in London, but because they feared this would herald another form of African enslavement, they refused. Nevertheless, even after that rejection, from 1841 to 1847, according to Sherlock and Bennett, “… 10,000 Africans were recruited mainly from St. Helena, Sierra Leone and adjoining coastal states,” to work the plantations.

Unlike their West African Maroon counter-part, post-emancipation, Central African BaKongo people were induced and enticed into traveling to Jamaica with the promise of a better life as indentured laborers, not as enslaved persons. Kay Saunders, Maureen Warner-Lewis

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8Senior, Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage, 20
10 Warner-Lewis, Central Africans in the Caribbean, p. 10
11 Ibid., p. 317-318
and Laura Tanna, authors who write on Central Africans in Jamaica confirm this. According to planters like the Scotsman, Commissioner General of Immigration, Alexander Barclay, these indentured immigrants could reap valuable rewards in the New World. In *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920*, Saunders writes, “The Select Committee on the West Coast of Africa firmly endorsed this recommendation on grounds that there was a sufficient population in Sierra Leone capable of emigrating and that their migration to the West Indies would benefit them as well as the Empire.” Ultimately, Central Africans were faced with the awkward dilemma of remaining in Africa, their native land, or beginning a new and “free” life in the West Indies.

Tanna points out in her article “African Retentions Yoruba and Kikongo Songs in Jamaica” that “The liberated slaves were originally taken to Sierra Leone and given the option of finding their own way home, remaining in Sierra Leone, or emigrating to the West Indies. [But] by 1850, coercion was used to ensure that these Africans emigrated as indentured labourers to the West Indies.” Colonel Sterling furthers this thought, adding that it was as a result of the Second Maroon War that some Maroons were shipped to Nova Scotia then Sierra Leone, then back to Accompong or St. Thomas, Jamaica, in the first place. Unfortunately, upon arrival in the New World Jamaica, many would find that the promises made were groundless and that they would have to cope with imminent problems in their new home. One approach initiated for coping, similar to the Maroons’, was forming communal groups that brought all Africans together. These groups we find are labeled “nations.” Undeniably, Linda M. Heywood in

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13 Saunders, as quoted in *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920*, p. 13

13 Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Tales and Oral Histories*, p. 47
Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora shows that before leaving Africa, culture was the Central African’s bond; their way of nation-building, when she writes, “Central Africa represented a largely linguistically and culturally homogenous region.”

Further confirmation comes from John K. Thornton who insists that for Jamaicans, cultural continuity was not a challenge because captured Africans in the Americas “… were divided into … many ‘nations’ or ‘countries,’” long before coming to the Americas. Given this, the fact that after upwards of thirty years following the abolition of the slave trade, a large percent of the former enslaved Jamaican population was undeniably of Central African birth, suggests the inevitability of cultural continuity, or cultural homogeneity. Here, the Bongo/Kongo Kumina Nation is one example of cultural homogeneity of Africans in Jamaica.

The Kumina people, or Jamaicans of BaKongo decent who were born into the practice of Kumina, refer to themselves as “Africans.” On meeting Mother Bernice Henry, a Kumina Queen in Port Morant, St. Thomas, Jamaica, this was confirmed. In fact, when Mother Bernice was asked, after I took a photograph of her, what she wanted the caption to read, she proudly said, “African Woman Mother Bernice.” Kumina itself is a religious belief system which is rooted firmly in Central Africa, partially in West Africa and is sustained by descendants in Jamaica. Consequently it is recognized as “a pathway or channel between … tradition and

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16 Full abolition of the slave trade in the Caribbean came in 1838, while approximately three thousand plus Central Africans were transplanted to Jamaica as “indentured labourers” from 1840 to 1864 according to Maureen Warner-Lewis and Philip Curtin.


18 Kumina Queen Mother Bernice Henry, interview with author, Port Morant, Jamaica, 4 July 2007
what is being evolved, on new soil, in the Caribbean.”

Kumina is also important in that it is a “… reinterpreting [of] African and Christian cosmology to fit the Jamaican experience … discarding ethnic disunity in favor of pan-African [and cultural] solidarity.” The necessary pan-African solidarity, seen as nation-building, is the Kumina ‘bands’ or group.

In Jamaica, the parish of St. Thomas is considered the historical and traditional center of Kumina’s vestiges from Central and West Africa in the form of folk culture or nation-building. Monica Schuler in Alas, Alas, Kongo writes,

Adherents of the Central African Kumina religion never completely left the communities they established in St. Thomas-in-the-East, but those communities existed, nevertheless, in the larger world of Jamaica and a plantation society composed of Creoles, Maroons, and Europeans. Thus almost from the beginning Central Africans had one foot in the 'African world' and the other in the Jamaican world.

Schuler’s writing confirms that when enslaved Africans arrived in the New World Jamaica, one of the main vestiges they brought with them was their ability to organize, and to follow ingrained organizational principles. In St. Thomas, it is believed that the Bongo/Kongo Nation is descended in a large part from indentured African laborers of the BaKongo region of Central Africa where the norm was banding together. Although some of the enslaved people were forced to be together on foreign soil, members of the Bongo/Kongo Nation were able to recognize in each other, certain cultural similarities that could provide a basis for harmonious interaction. Consequently, they adopted this. In New World Jamaica, the prestige of having a

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19 Warner-Lewis, Central Africans in the Caribbean, p. xxiv
21 Ibid., p. 71
connection to the Old World, Angolan roots in Kumina, is realized when devotees are titled “king Koongo” or “ring-born Koongo,” and described as real or true-born Koongo, respectively. True to tradition, one must be born into the Bongo/Kongo Nation of Kumina to be a part of any Kumina band. For instance, “The [above] terms are applied only to those who come from a long line of Kumina devotees who are very knowledgeable in the tradition of the Kumina religion. Again, as shown by Warner-Lewis the ‘Congo tribe’, or ‘Congo Nation’ is sometimes held to be synonymous with the ‘Bongo Nation’—the entire “African Nation” which practices Kumina.”

Kumina groups represent a strong faction of cultural homogeneity and keep Jamaica’s folk forms current and culturally linked. Moreover, Kumina is one of the strongest African retentions to be found in Jamaica and continues to have a role in the development of Jamaican folk forms.

CONCLUSION and FURTHER STUDY:

African customs of the Old World are not forgotten. Thus, “history is important to Maroon society for the following reasons,” says Gottlieb: “it provides explanations for contemporary customs, it is a major source of motivation for behavior, it defends and maintains certain aspects of customs, and it contributes to the Maroons’ image of themselves.” Further, according to Leann Thomas Martin in “Maroon Identity: Processes of Persistence in Moore Town,” the “Maroons ability to persist … hinges on their uses of the past … It is not merely the possession of history that counts; it is the use, creation, recreation, and maintenance of useable history that makes for Maroon success.” Here again, there is proof that Akan influence cannot be contested because in every respect it is realized in Maroon culture.

22 Warner-Lewis, Central Africans in the Caribbean, p. 15
24 Ibid., p. 76
The Akan/Asante turned Maroon, and the BaKongo turned Bongo/Kongo Nation became one people, albeit a hybrid people in Jamaica. Born from nations and territories that began in Africa and converged in Jamaica, the Akan/Asante and the BaKongo people became what is often called Afro-Caribbeans; cultures that are predominantly African. The Akan/Asante, for example, as Africans in Jamaica would not accept the name “Maroon,” nor would they be slaves. Furthermore, although history and literature vary in the etymology of the word maroon, and generally conclude that its beginning derived from the meaning for fugitive slaves in the New World, the French word marron, the Spanish words Cimarron (or domestic cattle), or marrano (“hog hunters”), the name was not accepted. The colonizer’s name, “Maroon” may have lasted throughout history, but the descriptive word “marronage” did exemplify these Afro-Caribbeans. Generally, marronage is defined as a process which involves establishing African hegemonies in the mountains of Jamaica away from colonizers, and forming culturally homogenous societies. The yenkenko, the true name for these Afro-Caribbeans in Jamaica, according to Colonel Sterling, found cultural hegemony in New World Jamaica politically and physically. The other Afro-Caribbeans are the BaKongo of the powerful Kingdom of Kongo, who believed heavily in tradition. This tradition which also manifested politically and physically was instilled in their Jamaican descendants. One example is their name, BaKongo spelled with the Africanist “K” and not the non-Kongo “C,” another is the syncretic adaptation of the Kongo Cosmology. Further, although the BaKongo were forced to make a home in Jamaica as the Bongo/Kongo Nation, cultural continuity was not a challenge for some because they were already familiar with building nation groups in Africa.

It seems clear that these African-Caribbeans developed because of occupation, colonization, importation and cultural resistance. However, it must be noted that all countries of the Caribbean share a common engendered aesthetic experience which is drawn from African

\[25\] Dunham, *Katherine Dunham’s Journey to Accompong*, p. 10
religious roots. Jamaica and Jamaicans are not different. Religion binds them. The Akan/Asante brought with them the Yoruba, Akan and vodun practices, while the BaKongo brought the Kongo Cosmology. New World Jamaicans used this connection to Africa not only as a reason for being together, but also as a reason to survive. These religious practices helped Jamaicans to build and sustain a nation. With religion came dance and music, learned practices that when balanced against the unknown—the New World experience, they did not have to go far.

The trajectory of this study in its entirety seeks to find and connect specific West and Central African dances historically and theoretically to their contemporary Jamaican counterparts, by looking at these dances as social and spiritual barometers of Jamaican life. Because the dance tradition lives in performative mediums on stage, as well as on the streets, it is important to include how today the African memory of religion and culture is being retained, refined, and filtered into current choreography by professional dance makers. To show this, interviews with present-day Caribbean choreographers making dance for the stage are conducted; their answers, I know, will confirm that there is continued connection with Africa.