

Preserving tradition - Jonkonnu dancers

Screams pierced the air like sharp knives, high above the sounds of fifes and drums and even a grater that created music for dancers in colourful costumes. Children, teenagers and even adults were sent running; they were afraid.

One little boy could not manage the excitement. Scared of the men in the masks, he escaped the grasp of a guardian and ran into the arms of another, in an attempt to get away from the taunts of a dancer. There was no gruesome end to the story though, as the Kayaea Jonkonnu Group performed on the streets of downtown Kingston recently.

The group had just finished a stage performance when they took to the streets, giving many an experience they had never had before - though the tradition is more than a few decades old. Some pretended, as part of the excitement, but many in the crowd watching the festivities were genuinely afraid of the antics of the dancers who charged at them aggressively, while all the time demonstrating a variety of dance movements.

Behind the masks and the costumes, there is much happening.

Carlton Walters, head of the 19-member Kayaea Jonkonnu Group from St Mary, says he has been performing with a Jonkonnu group since he was a member of his father's group at 13 years old.

Today, with his own group, Walters is facing several challenges. Jonkonnu is just not as popular as it used to be and he and his group are struggling to strike the balance between keeping Jamaican culture alive and staying financially viable.

Walters said the group gets paid for doing different gigs, and tries to collect donations from people while performing, but that has not been going well.

"We are trying to get a transport to put a dent in our time that we reach events," he said, adding that they currently use public transportation to get around.

While that is a problem, the 35-year-old added that a mounting concern is that people think some members of the group are politically affiliated because of the colours of some costumes like the Jack-in-the-Green.

"Some will say 'Run the Labourite!', and I believe it's because they don't know the significance. When they look at it, they just see a colour which represents one thing for them," he added.

Dying tradition

Like Walters, Quindell Ferguson, a costume designer for The Jamaica Cultural Development Commission, lamented the dying of traditions she grew up loving as a youngster on Mark Lane, downtown Kingston.

"Jonkonnu was a big thing Christmas morning. They just come out a beg and stuff. All of that just cut out. The cable and television just take away from that," said Ferguson.

According to her, it is frustrating and disappointing to see such a rich culture eroded.

"It make you feel sad sometimes. Now you take them (children) downtown, it's just clothes, not the usual toys and what you would see like at Grand Market," Ferguson said of the vendors who ply their wares downtown.

Delroy Gordon, acting executive director of the JCDC, also said the memories of Jonkonnu were quickly being erased.

"It's not as popular as it used to be because a part of the thing is that it used to provide a lot of entertainment, particularly around Christmas time. Now, persons look to other sources for entertainment," said Gordon.

He added that the country was also being influenced by other cultures, which was undoubtedly one of the reasons for the tradition's decay.

However, Gordon went on to point out that the JCDC has programmes, such as the Children's Jonkunnu Costume Competition and the Jonkonnu Festival, which are aimed at rebuilding the traditions of Jonkonnu.

While it is too early to tell what is on the plate for next year, Gordon pledged that as long as the JCDC exists as an organisation, it will continue to fulfil its mandate to preserve the Jamaican culture.

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