

drums, three small and cylindrical and a big bass drum, took over. With its evocations of the Old Testament—the 400 years of captivity in Babylon—Rastafari seemed surprisingly Protestant in tone, as Wedderburn preached and the hymns revealed their familiar words.

Slow, emphatic rhythms were not reggae, but seemed on their way to it. Dancing involved emphatic but subtle body language to match the rhythms, with shoulders and upper torso shifting. The elegant Offutt and the lush Meri often danced in place, shaking heads, bending over to listen. They waved hands in opposition and their bodies, too, and snaked their heads out. The men as well as the women made another parade around, shifting back and forth and chanting without drums, “Are you ready now? Children, are you ready now to fly?” Wedderburn took a conch from the altar and blew into it and spoke about the Maroon rebellion and a leader who “used to catch bullet with his butt.” A song, “Nobody’s fault but mine,” sounded like a spiritual and this Nyabinghi ceremony was loose enough to take in “Down by the Riverside” and “Let’s get together, let’s not fight,” to protest the possible bombing of Iraq. The audience, much of which had been up swaying, seemed to be up in it’s entirety by the end, swaying and dancing and jumping around, feeling very good.

LA TROUPE MAKANDAL —FEBRUARY 24, 1998

La Troupe Makandal’s evening was a Ceremony for Ogou, with priest, altars, veves, drummers, and the dancers of the company as celebrants. Again the line between performers and audience were erased, one of the prime intentions of this festival. Though, as Lois Wilcken, an ethnomusicologist, explained, such ceremonies usually go on for six or seven hours, this one was condensed, and it was both exciting and illuminating.

Two sequined veve banners hung behind the musicians. Before them a long Vodou pattern in chalk had been inscribed. There were several altars

and ritual centers: a chalk pattern at the entrance, a chalk circle with among other things, a knife standing upright (this was a ceremony for Ogou, master of power, of metal, of agriculture, technology, and war) at the front of the performance area, and a large altar installation to the side by artist Pablo Yglesias. The latter was part of the performance environment for the whole festival, but the Ceremony for Ogou also used it as an altar, with the priest and his assistants approaching it during parts of the ceremony, just as they went to the entrance circle and the one with the knife. Yglesias’ beautiful altar involved a white clad table, with a big urn with white flowers on top. At the bottom were silver dishes with black substances (ashes, earth, wine and earth, river stones), lotus candles and tall candles. A complicated Vodou pattern was chalked before this and before all of this, a large white circle was inscribed.

The troupe is led by Master Drummer Frisner Augustin, who drums for vodou ceremonies as well as folkloric performances, making him exactly the kind of intermediary sought out by this festival. Drummers in sequined caps took their places for the Priye, the Opening Meditation, Augustin began the chant, and dancers in big white ruffled dresses and white headwraps came in with rolling chests. The priest in multi-color shirt made libations with his rattle, accompanied by his two assistants, dancers Nadia Dieudonne and Smith Destin. They bowed and touched heads to the floor before the drummers and placed a candle and rum bottle in the circle with the knife. Dancers shook shoulders as they stepped around or side to side in foot closing steps.

Destin, as Legba, Guardian of the Crossroads, who opens ceremonies, danced with a knife, heaving chest, crouching or taking long steps forward to the ritual areas, touching veve patterns with his sword and holding it to the foreheads of all the participants and the front rows of spectators. With a hesitating step and many changes of direction, he danced with the sword in his two hands, sometimes swirling it around. The

shining, colorful veve banners, which had been removed, worn as shawls, and taken to the other ceremonial areas and held next to the heads of all who received the anointing of the sword for the Flag Parade and Orientation to the 4 Cardinal Points, were returned to the wall for the Salutations for Danbala, Generator of Life, Breath, and Movement. The ritual sites were again visited by the priest shaking his rattle. Dancers moved out with snaking chests and when they broke into the possession step, the priest shook the rattle between them. One woman writhed on the floor, possessed, and was covered by a white cloth. Another woman got under the cloth with her as if talking to her. Others clasped the hands of the writhing dancer, who rolled from side to side while other dancers moved with quick side to side or foot chasing steps. They danced vigorously, shaking shoulders and whirling as the priest and his male assistant carried the now stiff, cloth covered possessed woman out.

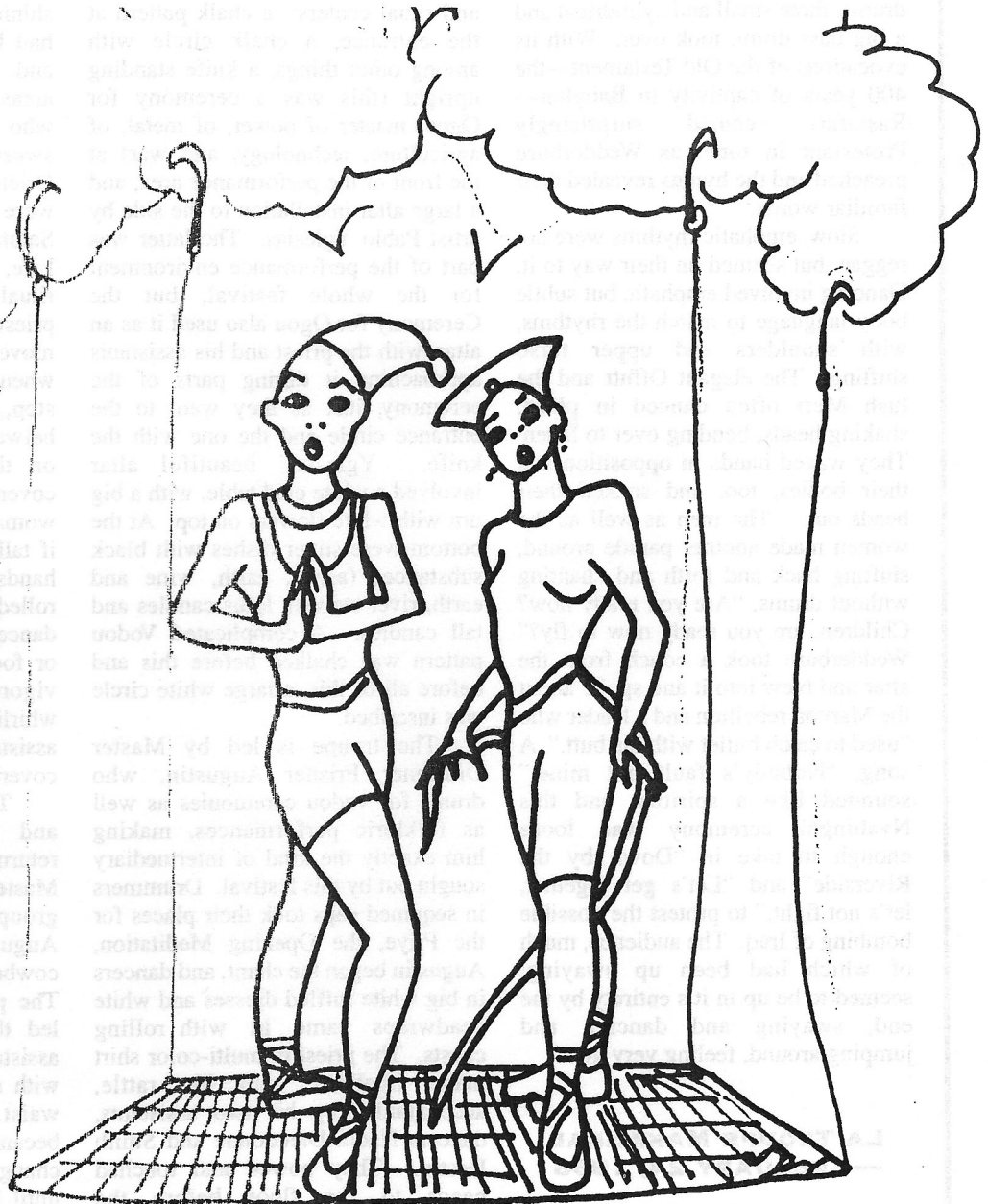
There was a break at this point and when La Troupe Makandal returned it was for the Rites for Ogou, Master of Power. The very strong group of percussionists, led by Augustin, used conga drums, cowbells, sticks, and frame drums. The priest, now with red headband, led the group in, with his female assistant now in multi-color headwrap with scarves of several colors at her waist. After ritual visits, Destin became a focus, dancing emphatically, changing direction with his outer foot, until he knelt and charged out as if possessed by Ogou. Dancers wrapped his head in red and wrapped his flailing arms as if to tie him down. They took off his shirt. He got up and they tied a red scarf around his elbows. The priest faced him with the sword and gave it to him and he danced with it, bending it against the ground and slapping it to the floor near the chalk circle. Presenting the sword to other dancers, they grabbed it, even bent it out of shape.

Ogou, on a knee, linked head to head with Dieudonne, their extended arms rolling. She rolled around and danced as if possessed, flinging herself around with a pivoted foot

until she collapsed. The priest sprayed rum at her. Ogou was then prostrate on the floor, the rhythms very fast. He was carried off by the priest and a couple of dancers. Dieudonne was up, dancing with others, shaking shoulders and turning around. Audience members were urged up to dance and most who did knew the steps.

A chant was taught to us before the Salutations for Ezili Danto, Mistress of Tough Love. Ezili's rhythms are infectious and her dance is marked by subtle shoulder shakes. Augustin sang in the center to start while the priest began his rounds. Chasing steps, bent backs, staggering steps, hands to head, along with those shaking shoulders were part of the dancing. A woman in possession burst between the priest and Destin, carrying rum bottles, thrusting herself around. Everyone, including many audience members, was brought into this wonderfully rolling, roiling dance and people linked arms or pressed heads together with arms loose, danced with others or alone, shook shoulders and rolled hips.

Though Gede is Lord of the Cemetery, with undertones that are scary and death heralding, his Salutations also brought infectious rhythms for his ebullient dance. Gede loves life too, even as he takes it. Women were grabbed from the audience for the little circling steps of his lascivious dance, with its constant twists. Augustin chanted to Papa Gede, while sinuous dancers took the floor with subtle hips and ripples of chest and arms. Destin and a woman danced with wide seconds, facing each other, or danced in a crouch across the floor. The priest continued his ablutions with shaking rattle. A dancer tied a cloth around her hips to emphasize her pelvic thrusts and hip curls. Undulating hips before a drummer, tossing a stick forward and back with



pelvis thrusting, bending her quivery legs in, a dancer, as Gede (Dieudonne, I think), shook her head and offered a bottle to a spectator, dousing her, and spraying scented water around. A new rhythm found Gede dancing with a stick, leaning on it and rolling the pelvis. Thrusting the pelvis she demanded money—and got some. When Gede wants you, Gede gets you—partners were chosen and danced. Gede twitched and shimmied, getting more and more involved. Destin put her in a chair as if she were really possessed and had to be comforted and brought out of it.

We were pretty possessed ourselves, by then.

**EMILIO BARRETO AND LOS
AFORTUNADOS
—FEB. 27, 1998**

As the three performances I saw progressed, the crowds got larger, until by Friday when Emilio Barreto and Los Afortunados, an Afro-Cuban Folkloric Ensemble, led by Felix Sanabria, came to the Thread Waxing Space, audience filled three banks of chairs, surrounding a stage and