

Covering letter

8 November 2004

Dear Chair of the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund,

Please find enclosed two copies of the report of my trip to Brazil, funded by LUTSF, together with a disc, with that same material.

**Title:** *Afro-Brazilian dance forms, past and present: Spirituality, race, identity and emancipation*

**Dates of trip:** Dec 2003 - June 2004

The objectives of my trip were achieved to a great extent. I studied dance at several locations (mainly Escola de Danca de FUNCEB, Escola Criativa de Olodum and Dida) and with several teachers (including Rosangela Silvestre, Joaquim and Maria) and gained a broad understanding of Afro-Brazilian dance forms, including the dances of the Orixas (deities of nature that originated in the Yoruba tradition of West Africa), in a variety of forms.

My Portuguese became colloquially fluent and I studied texts on Candomble (the Afro-Brazilian religion in which dance is used to communicate with deities), on the development of Afro-Brazilian dance, on social movements in which dance had been used as a tool of community and political empowerment and was able to study websites of groups that had been engaged in that movement. I spoke to a wide range of dance professionals and political and community activists who used music and dance as agents of change. This gave me first hand accounts of historical and present-day developments. As well as meeting some of the initiators of the 70s and 80s black empowerment Afro-bloc movement, I also spent time in classes that were teaching dance, racial identity and radical history.

One of the highlights was dancing in carnival with Olodum, a famous Afro-bloc, who rarely allow foreigners to dance with them. We danced for six-hour stretches, accompanied by a 100-strong drumming band, on three different days of the famous Salvador carnival.

Since my return, I have continued to teach adults for free with Rhythms of Resistance samba-reggae band on a weekly basis and have taken my new vocabulary of steps into the streets of London for performances, community workshops and on political demonstrations. I taught dance for five days to socially-excluded Roma children in Belgrade in July, and have started to confidently incorporate Afro-Brazilian elements into choreographies within my continued dance studies. I am working on a series of articles for different publications in which to disseminate further what I have learnt.

Yours faithfully,

Kate Burrell

### **Afro-Brazilian dance forms, past and present: Spirituality, race, identity and emancipation**

In December 2003, I travelled to Salvador de Bahia, and studied a number of Orixá-based dance forms, dances of deities of nature that are worshipped in Brazil and are of African spiritual origin. I learnt several different Orixá-based dance forms, their meaning and significance, religious, cultural and political, over the last 500 years. I also examined the role that the dances of the Orixas have had in political and community empowerment. For six months, I took classes in various forms of Afro-Brazilian dance from ancient to modern and buried myself in a corner of the library for African and Asian Studies, Portuguese/English dictionary in hand, scouring battered and worn texts.

My interest in such matters stems from my involvement in a London-based samba-reggae band, Rhythms of Resistance, a group of 30-odd percussionists, who take to the streets regularly to highlight global and local injustices, as well as giving community workshops to kids and adults, who often for one reason or another would be classed as 'disenfranchised' or 'socially excluded'. For three years, I have danced and taught dance with the band, and thanks to the Lisa Ullmann Dance Travel Scholarship fund, last year was able to take a delve into the roots of the music that we play and the steps that we dance and the tradition of community and political empowerment in which we follow, all of which originate in Salvador de Bahia, northeast Brazil.

Spiritual dances from the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomble have been preserved with little change since they were brought from West Africa by slaves. They are subtle dances with repetitive small steps and hand gestures which refer to symbols of the deity. In Candomble ceremony, drummers, using instruments that are virtually identical to present-day African drums, play rhythms that call down Orixas. Each Orixá responds to a different rhythm and will appear by melting into the body of a priest or more often a priestess, who then going through a trembling and shaking fit will embody the deity and dance as they dance. Paes and Maes de Santos, as the clergy are called, undergo liturgical training for a period of seven years to learn how to receive the spirit. And it is possible for lay people to study secularised versions of the choreographies at dance schools.

I studied the Orixá deities in several different forms, mainly at Escola de Danca de FUNCEB, a state run dance school, that specialised in Afro-Brazilian dance, and was attended by some of the strongest black professional dancers in Bahia in daytime open classes, as well as running a dance foundation course and providing many different evening classes that served cultural tourists and local bairro (neighbourhood) groups. I studied under several different teachers, trying to give myself as broad an understanding of Afro-Brazilian dance as was possible.

One day, towards the end of my stay I visited a Candomble ceremony, in a far off suburb of Salvador. The terreiro (religious house) was tucked away up a crumbling flight of concrete stairs. The large room was whitewashed and draped in white fabric and the entire

congregation was dressed in white to attract the good spirits and keep away the darkness. There are over 2000 terreiros in Salvador alone and Candomblé is the fastest growing religion in Brazil. Many people, mainly of Afro-descendence are attracted by the strongly held cultural and racial identity which Candomblé encourages. The religion survived, under much repression for 500 years of slavery, and served as a strength to the enslaved. Escaping slaves would make offerings to the Orixas, one of my teachers told me... 'to Exu to open the pathway for their escape, to Ossain, the God of the forest, to protect them whilst traveling, and to Ogun, the warrior to help them fight as and when necessary. They would pray to Xango, of lightning and thunder, for justice, and to Oxossi, the hunter, to help secure a food supply outside of the colonial empire, in quilombos, (autonomous villages or nations of escaped slaves that existed outside of Portuguese rule)'.

Stylised Orixa-influenced dances were used on the streets as part of a strong racial empowerment movement during the 1970s and 1980s in Salvador. In this form, Orixa dances are more theatrical and the subtle gestures of the terreiros become large sweeping arm movements that are much more easily recognizable to the untrained eye. Iansa, Goddess of winds and of fertility furiously waves her arms to make the winds blow and her hips swing and undulate to represent female power. Oxum, the beautiful goddess of freshwater holds her palm outstretched, as a mirror and admires herself, whilst her other hand caresses her hair and her jewels in self-admiration. In 1970s and 80s Bahia, her dances became a symbol of black beauty, 'a beleza negra', challenging more traditional notions of Brazilian beauty, which are associated with a Euro-descent look.

Until 1974, carnival in Salvador had been all white. Blacks had been allowed in the procession only to push floats and never to participate in the festivities. In 1974, a group of 100 Afro-descendants came together from a neighbourhood called Liberdade (literally translated as freedom). They took Afro rhythms, dress and dance into carnival to highlight neighbourhood issues of poverty and maldistribution of wealth. The dances were created, in the main, on the streets, or in carnival ensaios (open neighbourhood rehearsals), through improvisation by non-professionals, dances created by the people for the people and transmitted informally only by the gathering of people in celebration of identity. These neighbourhood groups were called Afro-blocs, and became active and dynamic social agents, using music and dance to educate black kids about their roots and stimulating a cultural revolution in Salvador which included a 're-Africanisation' of popular and legitimate culture and a rewriting of Brazilian history from a black perspective, to include stories of slave resistance and rebellions and black popular heroes.

I was lucky enough to study the Afro-bloc choreographies with Olodum, one of the most famous Afro-blocs. Olodum, was my local group and is globally famous for having taken the samba-reggae beat, an exciting fusion of samba, and reggae on a 6/8 beat, into the world music charts. And for featuring in a video with Michael Jackson, who having recognized the groups political clout, paid homage to them by singing to their 100 strong drumming band on the streets of Pelorinho, their, and my, neighbourhood. Joaquim was our teacher, a tiny dread-locked guy who said very little, and demonstrated the choreographies in such a way, that he barely moved. I studied alongside the black teenagers of Pelô, and through their interpretations of Joaquim's gestures, I learned 'danca-Afro' (Afro-dance). Joaquim, was particularly famous on the Salvador dance scene for his strong and true representations of the Orixas, but he had also traveled in Africa and had taken influences from dances from Senegal and South Africa, which he happily placed side by side Orixa dances.

I was one of only two foreigners, and only three non-Afro-descendants who were invited to dance in carnival with Olodum. Greatly honoured, though slightly disappointed by the simple costume of yellow cotton jersey shorts and Olodum tank-top(!), I danced alongside 40 fantastic furious and vibrant dancers, for up to six hours at a time on three days of the week-long carnival. My limits in physical stamina were overcome that week, as were those of most people in Salvador, by the sheer energy and excitement of thousands of people on the streets in celebration. Every café, bar, restaurant, every alleyway, street and avenue came alive with booming sound-systems, heaving, writhing, dancing, sweating, sometimes brawling bodies. Never in my life had I imagined the sheer power of people partying in the streets, knowing and loving their city, their music and their culture

I also attended some classes run by Dida, an all-women Afro-bloc, set up by the same guy who established Olodum. At Dida, young and vulnerable women are taught drumming, dance and literacy during the daytime and evenings, by fantastic dynamic and grounded women teachers, who use stories of the Orishas to tell tales about humanity, give positive role models for the women who may have little in the way of family and support. Dance was being used self-consciously as a tool of empowerment, to give vulnerable women self-confidence in their culture and their bodies, whilst being educated about the dangers of sex work as a route out of poverty. When Dida dancers perform on the street, they wear an iron mask over their mouth, to represent the silencing of black women during the times of slavery.

The third dance form that I studied was Silvestre Technique, a Brazilian dance technique created by Rosângela Silvestre, using influences from ballet, Cunningham, Capoeira, Afro-dance, Indian Chakra points and symbols from the Orixas. It is a technique assembled and created by Bahian Rosângela, during a long and successful career as a choreographer (which included working with Bale Folklorica, Bahia's most famous company), as she found that no single technique was adequate to train her dancers to dance in the way she required. It was also developed during a period where a strong discourse existed within the black dance world in Bahia, demanding legitimization of black dance forms, the writing of a history, the naming of steps, motions and movement qualities, the development of more serious training in black dance forms. As Salvador was undergoing a political cultural revolution, in the 70s and 80s with Afro-blocs putting black music and resistance history on the agenda, so in the world of dance, technique and practice was coming under scrutiny from black dancers, choreographers and teachers, who were starting to question the Eurocentric culture of Brazilian dance.

Rosângela Silvestre created an alternative training in dance that was both culturally and corporally relevant, a dance technique that appealed to black dancers who were rising up from the ghetto and white dancers who were perhaps in search of meaning, a training that had an ancient, spiritual or universal content. Silvestre Technique is angular, syncopated, asymmetrical, and driven by rhythm. It is fast and furious and demands enormous strength and flexibility especially in the entire back, involving rapid transitions from earth based focus to projecting up into the heavens. The four elements of nature are focuses of the dancer's imagination, which need to be examined and understood and lived and breathed in order for the dancer to know and move as Orixas, those spirits and personalities of the supernatural world.

I studied Silvestre Technique (ST) for four months with Vera, a student of Rosangela. For the month of January, Rosangela was in Salvador giving a month-long workshop for professionals. I attended daily. The level was high and the dance was challenging and satisfying. Dancers from Spain, Canada, the States and Argentina came to Salvador specially. I was lucky enough to have stumbled across the technique once I was in Brazil through my research of Orixá-based dance forms.

A few days after the end of the workshop, I interviewed Rosangela in a wholefood café in Barra, one of the better neighbourhoods in town, close to the beach and with an international ambience. I wanted to talk to her about cultural globalization and counter-flows to this, of which I consider ST, a strong and confident strand. This was not a topic which interested or inspired Silvestre, so we spoke about the potential of ST to overcome racial boundaries, and it being an accessible training for dancers who would normally never dare to, or be able to afford to study technique. Rosangela also told me that I was not alone in being deeply moved by dancing her steps. 'It is very rare for people from the West to have contact with the truly ancient', she said, 'and when they do, it can be a deeply emotional experience'. In this way, I suppose the Orixás not only feature in the symbology of the Technique, but make their presence felt through their ancestral being, which must be known and touched in order to be successfully danced.

My time in Bahia was stimulating and challenging. I pushed myself hard in terms of learning language, dance and cultural openness and understanding. Life was not always easy... I was robbed on a number of occasions and I sometimes felt a deep longing for my friends, family and all that was familiar to me.

However, I have come away from that experience with a wealth of new understanding about dance and how it fits in to lives and cultures, communication, belief-systems, ideologies, identities and cultural self-confidence. I have seen dance in community education at the highest level, carried out with the most conviction and scarcest resources and serious effect. I have seen and lived in a culture that has been most influential to my life and my direction and been able to construct a radical history for the dance practices that are my everyday experience.

Since my return, I have continued to teach Afro-Brazilian dance to adults for free on a weekly basis, and taken Orixá-influenced choreographies onto the streets of London every weekend. In July, Rhythms of Resistance band and dancers went to Belgrade and spent five days giving workshops to children from a racially-persecuted Roma community, ending in a gig where the musicians and dancers jammed with Afro-Brazilian and traditional Roma music and dance forms. In October, Rhythms of Resistance London hosted a gathering of 60 international sambistas. Dancers from London, Turin, Amsterdam and Berlin shared and improvised on the streets, in protest about the forgotten rights of migrants, and the role that the oil industry is playing in driving war. I have started to confidently take Afro-Brazilian influences into choreographies that I am creating in my continued dance studies, and I am training further in Community Dance practice. I am also working on a number of articles about my experiences in Brazil, which I hope to have published over the next few months.

For more information, or discussion on any of these issues, please contact me at [heresira@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:heresira@yahoo.co.uk)

For more information on Rhythms of Resistance band and dancers, please go to: [www.rhythmsofresistance.co.uk](http://www.rhythmsofresistance.co.uk)