



## ***Komfa Rituals And Clothing***

by Michelle Yaa Asantewa

Komfa is a spiritual practice that celebrates ethnic diversity in Guyana. To 'ketch Komfa' is to experience trance by which means spirits manifest on hearing the beating of drums. Rituals are enacted to honour a pantheon of seven ethnic spirits. These are African, Amerindian, Chinese, Dutch, East Indian, English and Spanish, reflecting those groups of people who contributed politically, socially, culturally and economically to Guyana's development. The pantheon therefore reflects the 'six peoples' linked to Guyana. There are inconsistencies in this association because arguably the indigenous (Amerindians) comprise nine groups of peoples, with different cultural expressions and languages. Most Guyanese reading this would also wonder about the missing Portuguese who are recognised as one of the six peoples. Guyana was once colonised by the Dutch before ceded to the British who brought enslaved Africans to the colony. Following emancipation in 1838, indentured labourers mainly from India arrived with Portuguese and Chinese migrants arriving respectively in the early and mid-19th Century. Due to the dominance of the British and their latter day economic contributions the Portuguese have been subsumed under the English spirit in the Komfa practice. Nevertheless, this mixing of cultures is a significant factor in the socio-cultural and economic development of Guyana and highlights the class status and stratification of Guyanese society.

Komfa is, however, practiced by African Guyanese. The word 'Komfa' can be traced to Ghana, West Africa and specifically to 'Okomfo' who are traditional priests, the most famous being Okomfo Anokye who summoned the golden stool from the skies and established the manifest soul of the Ashanti people. As well as spiritual practices in Ghana, Komfa is more widely linked to Mami Wata traditions across West Africa. When Africans were forced to migrate to Guyana they retraced the symbol of Mami Wata, which they called watermamma due to the many large rivers and waterfalls throughout the country. The word 'Guiana' (an earlier spelling) is believed to mean 'land of many waters.'

Komfa practitioners were also formerly associated with the Jordanites – so named after Nathaniel Jordan who advanced the Church of the West Evangelical Millennium Pilgrims (WEMP), founded in the late 19th Century by Grenadian Joseph Maclaren. The Jordanites were known as the 'White Robed Army' due to the head to foot white clothing they wore. They were evangelists, feared because of their proclamations during parades across the City of Georgetown and village communities. It is perhaps owing to this earlier connection with the feared Jordanites that ambivalence, ignorance and sometimes abhorrence of Komfa persist in Guyana.

Clothing, foods and a variety of symbols determine the ethnic spirit being honoured at a Komfa ceremony. Music is played for the entertainment of the spirits and in keeping with rhythms associated with their ethnicity, or which have become thus identified in the practice. All ceremonies begin with an element to honour the 'Celestials' who reside at the top of the hierarchy of spirits. The Celestials are the angels and archangels

as identified in Christianity with which the African elements were syncretised. After honouring the Celestials, demonstrated by wearing white clothing, practitioners might change outfits in accordance with the ethnic spirit being entertained. That may be, for example, a traditional Chinese QuiPao dress (Cheongsam in Cantonese) if the ceremony is for a Chinese spirit.

The colour white is associated with purity which reconnects the practice to many others across Africa, particularly Mami Wata, whose adepts wear mainly white and also the Yoruba (of Nigeria) practices, where Orisa (pantheon of spirits associated with the forces of nature) wear white and another dominant colour. White is also symbolic of the divine, of peace and spiritual ascension. Again, this is found in other spiritual traditions like those of ancient Kemet (now Egypt) where white was worn by Ausar the principle deity through which realisation of the Divine or Godself takes place. This is a 'personified' faculty of mind centred on enabling the individual to pursue their God-within consciousness.

Other colours found in the Komfa practice are: light blue, linked to the English spirit and symbolising prosperity, green is for the Dutch spirits and linked to money, yellow is for the Indian spirit though it's not clear what it signifies (outside of the practice, I'm aware that the colour is used for spiritual awareness and elevation), red is used for entertaining African spirits and reflects love, pink is for the Chinese spirit and stands for success, the Amerindians are represented by the colour orange – again it's not clear what this means, although the colour is reflective of the earth in the hinterland where the Amerindians live; and gold is used for the Spanish, signifying kingship. It is worthwhile to note that the European colonisers, the Dutch and English are identified with acquisition of wealth which is consequent of their economic dominance and basis for colonisation of the Guianas. In any case, all the colours are important features of a Komfa ritual whether dedicated to a particular ethnic spirit or not. In other words if one is entertaining an African spirit, those attending or hosting the ritual would wear red as well as African print clothing. The symbols, such as candles would also be red, but it would be unusual to only have red candles. This is because the colours have other socio-economic significance that adepts would wish to see manifested as part of the outcome of the ritual. It would be meaningless to have a ceremony that did not celebrate the essence of peace, purity and spiritual elevation (reflected in white), or one that didn't have an aspiration for prosperity (as the colour green represents) and success is the ultimate expectation which means pink candles would feature too. As above noted a Chinese traditional dress would be worn to entertain a Chinese spirit but specifically the dress would be pink, which resonates as an aspiration for success. I have hosted and attended rituals where all the coloured candles are used for the table setting. The host would select their dominant candle based on the spirit being entertained or desired aspiration.

A particular feature of clothing worn for African derived spiritual practice is a head wrap. Head wraps are a dominant part of African traditional clothing generally, but are especially worn during rituals and festivals. In Guyana, head ties or wraps have been worn since the time of slavery. This had a practical purpose of protecting the head during gruelling and cruel hours of labour under the hot sun. There were also styles worn for adornment which had meanings that were lost during the period of enslavement. Ordinary head ties continue to be worn as part of everyday dress with more elaborate designs worn for social functions such as weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies and other cultural events. Elegant wraps that rise atop the head giving the appearance of a crown, lifting the face and beautifully accentuating the cheekbones are favoured for connecting a sense of cultural empowerment.

Unlike some countries and islands of the African Diaspora, Guyana does not have a national dress (most cultural events create costumes from the colours of the flag). It does, however share a particular way of wrapping the head ties in a style seen throughout the African Diaspora. This style, at one time popularised by Hollywood as the symbol of the dotish 'Mammy' – a desexualised black woman whose function is to mother white children and their parents - is enshrined in folk culture and ritual. Guyana also shares the use of the Madras (a region in South India) cotton fabric for headwear. The plain cotton fabric was redesigned to incorporate the checks and stripes found in Scotland, the country that had controlled the trade in cloths th-



rough the East India Company during the colonial period. The head ties are found in variety of mixed colours in many of the territories formerly colonised by European countries, especially French, Spanish and British. Sometimes tied to elevate different numbers of peaks, these head ties were also a way of communicating status of availability to potential suitors.

There has been a renaissance of the various headwrap styles in recent years worn by African women of all ages, both on the continent and the diaspora who proudly celebrate their cultural forms of expressions. Social Media is replete with tutorials of the various ways to tie headwraps, using an array of colourful fabrics and materials. For the African woman who has endured images of beauty that epitomised white, usually fair haired women as the ideal, this renaissance is culturally liberating.

In Komfa clothing, their colours and styles, are symbolic of desired aspiration as reflected by the ethnic spirit being honoured. Given that it is predominantly practiced by African Guyanese who recognise the part played by other ethnicities in the formation of Guyana, the practice serves as a reminder of a powerful dynamic of cultural identity and diversity which has yet to be fully appreciated by the wider society.

