



THE MASQUERADE PERFORMING ARTS OF ST. KITTS & NEVIS

“Wherever the people of Africa were transported or subsequently migrated, they have carried with them the collective memory and baggage of their ancestry which have been incorporated to varying degrees into the way of life of those they met. Through their labour, ingenuity and innate ability to endure, they have withstood more often than not the hostilities of those they encountered along the way, leaving a stamp of their presence on the very people who tried to do them ill. Their rhythms of life which are given fullest expression in music and dance, have penetrated World Culture, and it is anticipated that as communication technology opens up the continent of their origin and invariably draws the people of the world closer, the role of Africa in World History will be more generally appreciation and given more prominence.

The Caribbean is one of the areas of the globe profoundly impacted by the African experience, and the very people who arrived bound in chains over a period of more than three hundreds years, are now for the most part, the master of our collective destiny.”

SCHS Newsletter, April-June 1999

The Traditional Masquerade Performing Arts of St. Kitts and Nevis emerged in the early 17th Century embracing the deep cultural roots and traditions of Europe and the Americas but are distinctly African in interpretation.

Far more than mere entertainment, the Masquerading Performing Arts evolved primarily as the avenue for outward expression of inward turmoil experienced by our enslaved African ancestors. Against the backdrop of the hardship of the Plantation system, these oppressed people were the players, the street was their stage, and the script was their voice, giving vent to the human condition of their time. Performed mainly at Christmas time, at a time when there was some relaxation of the rigid daily routines, masqueraders went from plantation to plantation, entertaining the planters and their friends receiving food and money for their efforts.

The Traditional Masquerade Performing Arts of St. Kitts and Nevis can be described as folkloric art forms created by the syncretic coming together of elements of Africa, European and Amerindian cultural practices. Born out of the crucible of slavery and the strength, resilience and creativeness of a people, the African aesthetics survived despite efforts by the Europeans to suppress the culture of the enslaved by imposing their own. As a result of this clash and contact, new cultural expressions were fashioned. The strong African influence in the costuming, dances and rhythms of these art forms harks back to celebrations and rituals of West African masking traditions associated with such activities as the initiation rites of secret societies and festivals.

These masquerading performing arts, known in St. Kitts and Nevis as *‘Christmas Sports’*, while still associated with the December celebration, continue to play to audiences throughout the year on special occasions, for tourists in hotels and at the cruise ship ports as well as for overseas events.

Migrations of people from these islands over the centuries saw their spread beyond the shores of St. Kitts and Nevis. During the first quarter of the 20th century migrants carried these masquerading traditions to Bermuda and the Dominican Republic as part of their cultural baggage and today they form an integral part of those countries folklore.

*Taken from the Draft Project Manual for the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage
Project now being undertaken in St. Kitts & Nevis as part of a wider Caribbean Initiative.
The Implementing Agency for the Federation is the St. Christopher Heritage Society.*