

The Shrine of Birago

Under the heading 'facilitator,' The Oxford Languages Dictionary says, '*a person or thing that makes an action or process easy or easier.*' And Birmingham's contribution to Birago Day, flowed easy and joyous, due to the co-ordinating skills of the event organiser, Anita Shervington, founder and director of BLAST. If Birago Diop had walked in - the eponymous hero of the inaugural African and Caribbean Folklore Day - I know he would have smiled and been happy, to see the spiritual magic, produced by inter-generational interaction. And didn't we sit together, in olden times, during the Moonlit Classroom? Around the evening fire, from grandchild to grandmother and all ages in between. From her opening speech to the Q and finale, I think he would have smiled throughout, grinned a lot and laughed here and there.

One aspect generating easy flow, was the way she had Master Drummer Asher B, during the interludes between speakers and performers, lead us from one area to another close by, with his jembe brilliance. A lifelong drummer, he has played with musical stalwarts such as IjahMan Levi. He was like one of the chosen drummers, heralding the royal Ashanti court, to the place of Yam Festival celebration. And that in itself was a lovely touch, a lesson in utilising space. It felt like being part of that entourage, that goes to give thanks for the blessings of yam. The first drum and movement came after the first talk, by Natty Mark Samuels, where he introduced early 20th century African Philosophers and Birago Diop; followed by an interactive meander, through African and Caribbean orality. Then the movement began; easy flow, following the drummer, going through the Shrine of Birago.

In the space where he led us, we heard Niquet Goldson. First, a story about the one I call the international celebrity of African Folklore: Anansi. Following the story of the eight legged one, she blest us with her singing voice, accompanied by her partner Phil on guitar and Asher B also; a rendition of two songs by Bob Marley, '*Redemption Song*' and '*Could You Be Loved.*' Apt that she should be a guest speaker, as she is a doctor also; of veterinary science, the profession of Birago Diop, who received his degree in the medical care of animals, from Toulouse University in France. And apt also, that we should hear music by a roots reggae singer. Whether clothed in animal skin, like Anansi the spider or Sungura the Hare, folktales are stories of you and I; so the songs of roots reggae, talking of the lives of the people. We know folk is just another word for people, so we can think of Bob Marley as a folksinger; '*Johnny Was*' and '*No Woman, No Cry*' are classic snapshot of Jamaican life. Before I go further, let me mention that this is another aspect that impresses me about Anita Shervington, the way she manages to always reach out; bringing in speakers appropriate to the theme, enhancing the content of the event, while widening the networks of learning and activism. For me and I'm sure for others, meeting Niquet, was the first time meeting a Black veterinarian.

Onward through the shrine, Asher B took us to an area where two young zoologists, Amelia Shervington-White and Aaron Mathew, from Trent University, Nottingham, gave us a presentation, introducing us to some of the rarer animals of Africa, sacred places and their interaction with Man. Listening to them, you could imagine the monumental Wangari Maathai, back in her student days and time of first activism. Because we will, I look forward to hearing of them in the future.

The drummer then led us back to the space where Niquet had spoke and sang. And as the performance of Capoeira began, history of migration unfolded; seeing a martial art founded in Angola, developed in Brazil, presented in England, by people of African Caribbean descent. And this alluring display, interweaving motion with music, celebrating heritage, was preceded by berimbau. If you haven't heard this instrument, then treat yourself. If you like the sound of the kora, the stringed instrument of the Jali – otherwise known as griot – I think you'll be enchanted by what the berimbau offers. Watching, I wondered if Zumbi, first hero of African Brazil, practised this art in the *quilombo*, the settlement of the enslaved who ran away. Let me take a few moments here, to mention those who gave us an insight into Bahia, the area of Brazil with the most residents of African descent; Leo Paninho, Denise Pantera, Ronke Fadare and Emile Belib. As with Niquet, for many present, this was their first introduction to a martial art founded in Africa.

Then we followed the chosen one back to the space of first use, where the event concluded with a Q and A of many questions and answers, with a panel of all speakers and performers. The highlight for me, of this segment, was the amount of questions directed at the two young zoologists.

We give thanks to the staff of the Birmingham Science Museum, also known as the Think Tank, for offering 'Our Changing Planet, Wild Life and Marine Galleries;' generating The Shrine of Birago; giving thanks for their enthusiasm for the idea and their flexibility in implementing it. Giving thanks to all the contributors, offstage so to speak, as well as the featured ones. To Birago Diop, for the inspiration that continues. And to Anita Shervington, for making Birmingham's contribution to the inaugural African and Caribbean Folk Day, such an engaging event. In time to come, if Birmingham should create a community consultancy hub, where people can learn how to network, activate, promote, delegate, then I hope she'll be invited to sit at the management table, or offered the role of chairwoman of the board of trustees. For all she has done for STEM career engagement; for African Studies and Birago Day, all those who were present on December 11th 2002, would happily nominate her: stand and salute her.