



## ***Memoria Saltationis: The Memory of Dance - 5 June 2020***

### **Dance and Difference: Afro-Sri Lankan Cultural Memories**

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Cultural memory is of more importance when historical narratives of communities are fragmented. Their oral history dates their arrival in Sri Lanka during the Island's British era. Cultural memory plays out the complex interconnections between memory, culture and identity. This paper concerns performances of *manhas* by an Afro-Sri Lankan community who draw upon oral traditions passed down through the generations. Chant-like *manha* singing is symbolic of the group's hybrid identity, linking them to the Portuguese through the lyrics written in creolised Portuguese. Their African roots surface through the dance that accompanies *manhas* differentiating the community from others in multiethnic Sri Lanka. Performances of *manhas* with energetic dancing brings out connections to the Swahili coast, a source of supply in the Indian Ocean slave trade. Whilst there has not been any connections between the contemporary community of Afro-Sri Lankans and their homeland through performance, Africa is created in Sri Lanka, giving them a collective identity. Embodied in the *manha* performances are issues of identity and belonging. Other Sri Lankans identify with the community through the dance movements of *kaffrinha*, an African-influenced dance associated with a form of music inherited from the Portuguese colonisers. Absence of a clear demarcation between ritual celebration and social recreation in African dance performance substantiates the hypothesis that *manha* performances embody spirit possession carried over from the Swahili coast. *Mimesis* is considered against the community's history and status.