

Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University, co-sponsored by the Yale Center for British Art

The Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation: Jamaica in the Atlantic World

November 1-3, 2007
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Masking the Spirit in the South Atlantic World: Jankunu's Partially-Hidden History

Kenneth Bilby, Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College, Chicago

Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/belisario/bilby.pdf>
© Do not cite without the author's permission

What exactly *is* Jankunu, and what does it represent? No one seems absolutely sure – not even the scholars who have looked at it most closely.¹ We are safe if we start with the most general of definitions, such as this one taken from a school book: “Jonkonnu [is] a festival with roots going back to the days of the slave trade” (Cooke 1998: 12). Festive traditions going by this name have been documented in several far flung parts of the Anglophone Caribbean – most notably in Jamaica, the Bahamas, and Belize – as well as in the United States, particularly in North Carolina and Virginia. We find many variations in details when we examine Jankunu from one place to the next, but there are certain basic elements that seem to be shared everywhere: almost always, there is some combination of masking (or at least costuming), parading, drum-based music, and dance. The other shared feature – and it is a very important

one – is that everywhere Jankunu seems to be closely associated with the Christmas holidays, and sometimes New Year’s celebrations as well.

Jankunu has received a surprising amount of scholarly attention for a tradition about which so little seems to be known with certainty. As a highly visible cultural manifestation that seems to have been very important in the lives of enslaved people in several parts of the Americas, and which seems to have been largely under the control of the enslaved themselves, it retains great symbolic significance, even in those places where it is no longer practiced. Just what Jankunu meant during the days of slavery, and what it means where it is practiced today, is a question that continues to occupy intellectuals in several fields. Among those who have been drawn to Jankunu in recent years are literary theorists. Richard Burton, for example, in his book *Afro-Creole*, makes a clear case for the centrality of Jankunu as a Caribbean cultural symbol. He states: “Few West Indian cultural forms are more complex in their origins, evolution, and meaning than Jonkonnu, and few are more important. Indeed, Jonkonnu could lay good claim to being the most ancient and most enduring non-European cultural form in the Caribbean... [U]nlike carnival in Trinidad, Jonkonnu is not a European cultural form taken over by West Indians and injected with a set of specifically West Indian characteristics and meanings. Its origins are without doubt African, and until the late eighteenth century it developed without significant interference from European influence” (Burton 1997: 65). Another literary scholar, Geneviève Fabre, has argued more broadly that this festive tradition has special significance as a form of evidence shedding crucial light on diasporic cultural processes. “Jonkonnu,” she says, “indicates the way culture circulated between continents, and represents a significant moment in the invention of slave culture. Placed at the center of much scholarly interest, this unusual

performance can be approached as a rich site in both African American historiography and history, the study of which may highlight important unheeded aspects of cultural processes” (Fabre 1994: 55).

This question of how Jankunu forces us to engage in important ways with history and historiography is one to which I would like to return shortly. But for the moment, I would like to point out that these literary theorists are relative newcomers, joining an impressive cast of earlier, as well as contemporaneous, scholars who have recognized the importance of Jankunu, and given serious thought to its meaning – a cast that includes folklorists such as Martha Beckwith (1928), Dougald MacMillan (1926), Richard Walser (1971), and Roger Abrahams (Abrahams and Szwed 1983); ethnomusicologists and music historians such as Helen Roberts (1924), Dena Epstein (1977), Clement Bethel (1991), Rosita Sands (1991), Vivian Wood (1995), and Timothy Rommen (1999); anthropologists such as Ira Reid (1942), Robert Dirks (1975, 1979, 1987), Virginia Kerns (Dirks and Kerns 1975), and John Szwed (Abrahams and Szwed 1983); cultural historians such as Sylvia Wynter (1970); sociologists such as Orlando Patterson (1969 [1967]); poets such as Kamau Brathwaite (1990); art historians such as Judith Bettelheim (1979, 1988); artists such as Linda Werthwein (2000); dance ethnologists such as Cheryl Ryman (1984) and Sheila Barnett (1979); scholars in performance studies such as Errol Hill (1992) and Keith Wisdom (1985); and historians such as Kamau Brathwaite (1972, 1990), Sterling Stuckey (1987), Lawrence Levine (1977), Michael Craton (1995) and Elizabeth Fenn (1988), among others.

The historical evidence strongly suggests that the Jankunu festival originated in Jamaica during the 18th century – possibly earlier. From there it seems to have spread to other English-speaking colonial territories where slavery was entrenched, including British Honduras (now

known as Belize) and other parts of Central America, North and South Carolina, Virginia, and the Bahamas. In each of these places, the tradition was indigenized and over time evolved in new directions, so that present-day versions of Jankunu, though they ultimately stem from a common source, show great variety.

One thing all these better-known present-day varieties have in common is that they are generally seen as secular forms of celebration and play lacking any explicit religious or spiritual meanings.

The North American version of the festival is thought to have died out in the late 19th or early 20th century. But historical reenactments of John Kuner performances have been staged during the Christmas season over the last few years in New Bern, North Carolina.

One theme that recurs in writings about Jankunu is the question of origins. Because Jankunu has gone through so many complex changes over the years, and has developed so many local differences, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint its precise origins. Although most scholars agree that it first emerged on this side of the ocean in Jamaica, there is little consensus on its ultimate sources. Over time, what appears to have originally been an African form of masked dance absorbed elements from European folk traditions – at least in some areas – and the result was a cultural amalgam that might be traced to both Africa and Europe. The apparently mixed heritage of most variants of Jankunu has led to a certain amount of debate over whether it should be considered basically an African-derived tradition, or an entirely unique creole tradition born in the New World, which must be seen as neither African nor European. While most writers have placed greater emphasis on Jankunu's debt to African traditions, a few, such as anthropologist Robert Dirks, have gone so far as to argue for primarily

European origins. According to Dirks, “for many years, John Canoe’s Africanism has been stressed... This seems misplaced emphasis. With the exception of syncretic musical components (i.e., drums and chorus), the dance appears decidedly European, though possessing clear parallels with certain aspects of African ritual... Evidence suggests that John Canoe derives directly from one or more of a number of closely related ritual house-visits... The European Sword-Dance is probably the most ancient member of this family” (Dirks 1979: 492). “John Canoe,” he concludes more generally, “derives from English folk tradition” (ibid: 495). Contrasting with this viewpoint, Rosita Sands argues that “there is no denying the African nature, the African essence, found in the salient elements of these celebrations” – referring to Jankunu, as well as other Caribbean and African-American festival traditions. I find this latter argument stressing the fundamental Africanness of Jankunu much more persuasive, for reasons that will become clearer below. While I accept that Jankunu is a complex amalgam of elements stemming from diverse sources – including British sources – I am less interested in these specific elements or traits than I am in the aesthetic principles and deeper cultural meaning underlying these surface features. The argument that Jankunu in some sense originates from, and remains connected to, a nexus of ideas that are essentially African in nature can easily be defended, I believe, for it is strongly supported by present-day evidence from Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean, some of which I will discuss below.

As we have seen, Jankunu was once practiced on slave plantations in several different parts of the English-speaking Caribbean and the southern United States. Involving “Africanesque” masked dance, drumming, singing, and parading, it has, for many, become a powerful symbol of a surviving African “spirit” in the Americas. Yet Jankunu today is most often

characterized by both foreign scholars and local commentators, including the majority of practitioners themselves, as a fundamentally “secular” tradition. In what remains probably the most comprehensive study of Jankunu as a pan-Caribbean phenomenon to date, the art historian Judith Bettelheim (1979: 227) concludes that this tradition is “fundamentally secular in nature.” In a later publication, she maintains this position, arguing that “the evidence suggests... that Jonkonnu is a secular festival. To say a festival is secular,” she continues, “means, above all, that it does not systematically address gods or spirits in a uniform or codified manner” (Bettelheim 1988: 40). In another extensive overview, the historian Michael Craton similarly concludes that all the “differently named variants” of the Jankunu festival, like the Bahamian version, are “essentially secular” (Craton 1995: 14). Viewing the tradition from a Bahamian perspective, the ethnomusicologist Clement Bethel goes even further, denying not only any spiritual significance in the present, but also the possibility of a religious connection in the past. “However attractive the theory that John Canoe was the relic of some deeply religious African ritual,” he argues, “it must be discounted... [The] suggestion of a religious origin of John Canoe must be laid aside” (Bethel 1991: 12-14). In the present, Jankunu continues to be portrayed by most practitioners themselves – the vast majority of whom practice the tradition only in the context of folkloric performances sponsored by state cultural apparatuses or commercial interests – as merely a type of “fun” or “jollification” with no deeper meaning.

Nonetheless, religious origins have been suggested by a number of scholars whose understandings have been shaped primarily, if not exclusively, by historical accounts of Jankunu during the slavery era, viewed alongside written accounts of West African festival traditions

that provide evidence of striking parallels. For a scholar interested in long-term historical processes unfolding over time, statements made by present-day Jankunu practitioners, although not to be dismissed, need not carry much weight in attempts to determine what the tradition might have meant to participants during its heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries. Meanings that held sway centuries ago could easily have been replaced by others in more recent times; original religious or spiritual meanings could have been lost or become submerged over time through a process of cultural erosion supported by hegemonic colonial ideologies that powerfully stigmatized any visible traces of the African past.

Given what was known of festival traditions in various parts of West Africa – which often included similar combinations of drumming, processional music, costuming, and masked dance – the hypothesis of a religious origin for Jankunu was bound to arise. Both masking and dance were pervaded by spiritual meanings across West Africa, where the European bifurcation of public life into separate “secular” and “religious” domains did not exist. Pointing out the similarities between Jamaican Jankunu and African masked dances, Orlando Patterson – one of the first to give serious thought to this question – proposed that the origins of the Jamaican tradition could be found in three “clusters” of West African festival traditions: 1) the yam festival of the Mmo secret society of the Igbo peoples; 2) the Egungun masquerades of the Yoruba; and, 3) the Homowo yam festival of the Ga people (Patterson 1969 [1967]: 244-47). All three of these are filled with spiritual purpose and closely tied to rites venerating ancestors. Following Patterson’s lead, a number of other scholars working on Jamaican Jankunu, including Sylvia Wynter (1970: 37-45), Sheila Barnett (1979: 25-28), and Cheryl Ryman (1984), have similarly argued that its origins lie in West African harvest festivals or other religious rites.

While pointing to a variety of possible sources, these authors have tended to privilege the Yoruba Egungun festival and/or the masked dances of the Poro societies spread across a large part of the region from which the enslaved were drawn. Discussing the cognate John Kuner festival of North Carolina, which is attested in several locations in that state during the 19th century but appears to have died out early in the 20th century, Sterling Stuckey (1987: 67-73) also notes very suggestive similarities with Yoruba Egungun observances, and concludes that such parallels clearly indicate that this North American version of Jankunu represented an African-derived religious expression of reverence for ancestors.

How can we really know what Jankunu might have meant to those who practiced it when it flourished on slave plantations during the 18th and 19th centuries? This question brings us face to face with a perennial historiographical and epistemological dilemma – one familiar to all who have a stake in the interpretation of the past in places where plantation slavery reigned. How is one to access such pasts? In fact, this problem in historiography is common to the study of all those peoples whose histories are often thought to reside in the written records left by those who dominated, colonized, and enslaved them. It is a problem that is particularly acute in the Caribbean region, and in Afro-America more broadly, where the written word was used as a tool in the service of domination, and where the enslaved were often purposefully excluded from the community of the literate. The unfortunate, and largely unavoidable, fact is that virtually all of the scholarship on the history of Jankunu to date has relied almost exclusively on a handful of reports written by European observers – white travelers, planter historians, government officials, missionaries, and the like – during the 18th and 19th centuries. Even if the authors of these generally brief descriptions were relatively free

of bias and unusually insightful about and sympathetic toward African cultural expressions – and none of those that I know of were – the idea that the records they left could be used in themselves to reach anything like a complete or deep understanding of the phenomena described is very hard to support.

If we, like Michael Craton (1995: 15), wish to reach “beyond the scarce and often purblind accounts of contemporary whites in an attempt to understand quite what Jankunoo [Jankunu] was like and what it meant to British West Indian slaves,” what can we do, other than rely on our imaginations? As Erna Brobder (1983: 7) asks, where “will we find the admissible data on the behaviour of people who left no memoirs?” And if we wish to extend our vision beyond observable behavior to the complex interior world of cultural meaning, by what means might we be able to (re)construct deeper “knowledge” of such people and the lives they created? Theorizing about the historical origins and possible spiritual foundations of Jankunu brings us squarely into this largely uncharted epistemological terrain.²

Another way to grasp the problem is to imagine the amount of time and effort most of these white observers invested in discussing the finer points of the Jankunu-related activities with the performers they occasionally encountered. What percentage of the activity surrounding Jankunu festivities did they actually witness? Their reports tell us virtually nothing about how the objects associated with Jankunu were constructed, how events were organized, how the songs, drum rhythms, and dances were learned and passed on, or what those who participated in the festivities thought about what they were doing.

It is very hard to accept the assertion by the anthropologist Robert Dirks that “the masters were involved as deeply as the slaves in the saturnalia.” “In a way,” claims Dirks, “it

was as much a white saturnalia as it was a black one” (Dirks 1987: x). This may be the impression left by some of these reports, authored by representatives of a class of people who often patronized Jankunu performances, sometimes with lavish donations. But careful thought suggests that it was not so. These literate overlords, whose lives were anchored to white spaces such as the Great Houses, and who seldom if ever ventured into the slave quarters where much of daily life was lived, witnessed but a tiny fraction of what took place during the holidays, and reported on only a fraction of what they witnessed. Consider a well-known report of Christmas festivities that took place in Jamaica during the 1820s. Thought to be one of the best and most detailed accounts of its kind, the report describes a Christmas-time slave performance at a Jamaican great house. “The merriment became rather boisterous as the punch operated,” writes the observer, “and the slaves sang satirical philippics against their master, communicating a little free advice now and then, but they never lost sight of decorum and at last retired, apparently quite satisfied with their saturnalia, to dance the rest of the night at their own habitations” (Williams 1826: 23). *To dance the rest of the night at their own habitations* – this, in my view, is the most important observation in this passage.

It was a scenario repeated over and over on slave plantations across Jamaica. During these holiday periods, when the rules of the plantation regime were relaxed to some extent, and at certain other times, such as at the funerals they organized among themselves, the enslaved retired to their own quarters to spend the night making music and dancing for purposes of their own. The written records tell us exceedingly little about what occurred at such times, and what it might have meant to the participants. To gain access to these deeper meanings, historians must find ways of reading between the lines.

Once again, given that the vast majority of contemporaneous written documentation, particularly in the Anglophone Caribbean, was produced by authors who were not only hostile to the cultural worlds that interest us, but largely ignorant of them, where do we turn for our evidence? What can we do, other than rely on our imaginations? It was this need to reach beyond written sources that brought me once more to Jamaica, and to Belize and the Bahamas – three places where related festivals known as Jankunu continue to be practiced – to see if I could find practitioners of undocumented or under-documented older variants of the tradition who might be able to help shed light on older meanings.

My comparative fieldwork and historical research suggest that in all locations older forms of Jankunu were gradually overtaken by a complex process of secularization that led to the loss or obscuring of a once-important spiritual dimension.³ In the Jamaican case, as we shall see, this occurred as older, Afro-creole components that were once central to the tradition were replaced with creolized European-derived components.

How much of the history of Jankunu can be found among the descendants of the enslaved themselves? How much can we learn about past practices and meanings from the descendants of those who originally created and practiced these traditions? This is an extremely complex question, to which I cannot begin to do justice here, but which I examine at some length in a book on Jankunu on which I am currently working (Bilby forthcoming b). I would suggest that it is precisely among the descendants, particularly the *spiritual* descendants, of these Jankunu performers that we stand to learn the most. By “spiritual descendants,” I mean those present-day practitioners whose Jankunu traditions are most directly descended from those of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Yet exactly who these spiritual descendants might be – how many there are, and where they might be located – is still under investigation. I know of at least a few communities in Jamaica inhabited by Jankunu practitioners whom I consider to be among the most direct spiritual descendants. But before I provide some information on these communities, a word of caution is in order. Like people everywhere, present-day Jankunu practitioners constantly recreate their pasts, and in some places this process has become entangled with powerful complicating forces such as commodification driven by tourism, or government intervention in the service of nationalism. The Bahamian ethnomusicologist Clement Bethel provides a clear idea of what can happen when such forces take over, summing up the situation in the Bahamas. “In recent years,” he states, “it seems that Junkanoo, while growing in beauty and cost, has been losing its distinctive character. The development of tourism and the zeal for cultural advancement have resulted in an imposition of numerous rules on the parade, and have thus led to its distancing from the ordinary Bahamian. More and more, Junkanoo is becoming a spectacle, a show in which only the few can take part; more and more, it is becoming a commodity to be mass-produced and sold to audiences” (Bethel 1991: ix-x).

Under circumstances such as this, the quest for “history from below,” as some call it, can become increasingly elusive. I received a poignant reminder of this when I read an account of Jankunu’s history by an important Bahamian practitioner, Maureen Duvalier, given to Rosita Sands during an interview in 1988. “This man, his name was John Conoe,” said Duvalier, “and he was the voice of the slaves... I can’t tell you that part of the history. It’s only what I read up there [at the Smithsonian] when I went... The parade was named after this man because it was the rest period for the slaves, and [...] their holiday, you see. And this guy was the one who

instigated this and got it going... Now I got this from the Smithsonian, so it has to be good history” (Sands 1991: 97). So far as I have been able to determine, this “good history,” supposedly originating with, and therefore invested with the authority of, the Smithsonian Institution, is completely groundless.

In this way, versions of history multiply, sometimes creating or compounding confusions when they enter the scholarly literature and become more widely disseminated. One such confusion, I believe, is the notion, widely accepted in Jamaica, that the original music of Jankunu was played by fife and drum ensembles – and that this music, as played today, is continuous with, and authentically representative of, the music that usually accompanied Jankunu performances during the slavery era. There is evidence, however, suggesting that the dominance of fife and drum music in connection with Jankunu is a relatively recent development, as is the addition of many new masquerade “characters” to Jankunu bands. These newer trends came to the fore during a series of all-island Jankunu competitions sponsored by Jamaica’s main newspaper, the *Gleaner*, in an attempt to revive the tradition in the early 1950s (Bettelheim 1988: 42-44; Bilby 2007: 129-130). In the process, older forms of Jankunu were generally forgotten. Here we have a striking example of how processes of “folklorization” can create new complications for the practice of historiography.

When examined more carefully, the evidence suggests that the more obviously European-derived components of the Christmas festivities – which included “actor” characters, mumming troupes, and fife and drum bands – eventually overshadowed the more obviously African-derived components. Those aspects of the creolized Christmas celebrations generally perceived to be of African origin were heavily stigmatized, and their suppression gradually

forced them underground, while those aspects understood to be of European derivation emerged as the dominant forms. As they became dominant, these Euro-creole forms, originally known as “masquerade” but now often referred to as “Jankunu,” contributed to gradual secularization (Bilby 2007, forthcoming a). As a result, in Jamaica today, although its partial African origins are still acknowledged, Jankunu is almost universally understood to be a secular form of masquerading involving silent mumming by all-male troupes to the music of fife and drum bands. Singing is never involved in these newer, now dominant forms. Investigation of the written historical sources, however, shows that Jankunu was quite different from this during its heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries, when it flourished on slave plantations.

As opposed to silent mumming backed by a fife and drum band, the older forms of Jankunu most often featured a mixed male-female chorus, and a lead dancer wearing a large headdress in the shape of a house, together with a unique type of square or rectangular frame drum played with the hands, known as the *gumbe* (also sometimes spelled *gumbay* or *goombay*). Versions of this house headdress and square drum were once found in almost all the places for which we have historical descriptions of Jankunu – including the southern United States and the Bahamas. Today, so far as I know, the only place where they are still found in connection with Jankunu – and then, only in a few rural areas – is Jamaica. In these areas, singing is also an important part of Jankunu, and women usually play an important part as singers. This contrasts with the modern, secularized forms of Jamaican Jankunu, in which all-male bands of masqueraders move to the purely instrumental music of fife and drum ensembles.

Just as important as the Jankunu headdress is the gumbe drum. In all those parts of Jamaica where the gumbe has survived to the present as part of a continuous, living tradition, it is associated with the invocation of ancestral spirits. A facsimile of the old gumbe drum – divested of its association with ancestral spirits – is even found in the historical reenactments of the John Kuner festival done during the Christmas season in North Carolina. These revived North American gumbe drums were reconstructed using verbal descriptions of this instrument in historical accounts of the North Carolina version of the festival – accounts which, not surprisingly, make no mention of any spiritual meanings that might have been attached to these drums during the 19th century. But in present-day Jamaica, among the far-flung Maroons of Charles Town (Portland), Scot’s Hall (St. Mary), Accompong (St. Elizabeth), and among old-style Jankunu practitioners in a few non-Maroon communities scattered across St. Elizabeth parish, the gumbe continues to be used to call the spirits of ancestors into the heads of mediums, through a process known as *myal* (spirit possession).

In short, my fieldwork reveals that an important spiritual dimension is still recoverable in older forms of Jankunu practiced or remembered in various parts of the Caribbean today. These spiritual meanings are clearest in Jamaica, where, in a few rural communities, Jankunu celebrations during the Christmas season still revolve around the invocation of local ancestors to join in community festivities. But in Belize too – and to a lesser extent, in the Bahamas – I found that some older practitioners could speak clearly on this question, confirming underlying spiritual meanings and associations.

To bring this out more clearly, let me provide a bit more descriptive detail on one older variant of Jankunu I studied in Jamaica.⁴ In this rural community in St. Elizabeth parish, Jankunu

forms part of a larger performance tradition known as Gumbe Play – a religious tradition in which music and dance are used to invoke the spirits of local ancestors for purposes of healing and spiritual counsel. Whereas Gumbe Play is a religious ceremony practiced year-round, as the need arises, the Jankunu tradition, in this community as in other parts of Jamaica, is a seasonal observance that occurs only during the Christmas holidays. In this particular community, construction of the Jankunu (as the house headdress itself is called) may begin as early as November. The Jankunu builder – the individual with primary responsibility for construction of the headdress – is always a *myal-man* with special training in this art. The term *myal* refers to spirit possession, and *myal-man* means “spirit medium.” The *myal-man* who designs and builds the house headdress is referred to as the *massa*, or “master,” of the Jankunu. Traditionally, each builder was taught his craft by an older master (sometimes receiving additional coaching from spirits in visions), in the process becoming yet another link in an extended lineage of Jankunu builders.

Today, spiritual observances in Gumbe Play in this village center on two family cemeteries belonging to two distinct sections of the community, known as Rhoden Town and Brown Town. The 19th-century founders of Rhoden Town and Brown Town (named Benjamin Rhoden and Bob Brown, respectively) – the men who are said to have been the original purchasers of the land on which these settlements grew during the years following Emancipation – were, according to oral tradition, not only the original settlers of this area, but the first Jankunu builders of the community. Each is buried in the local cemetery bearing his family name (both of which are in the vicinity of the current dancing area known as Big Yard), as

are a number of other Jankunu builders and myal dancers of more recent generations whose names are still remembered and revered today.

On Christmas Eve a major Gumbe Play – in this case, a Jankunu Play – is held. As the night wears on, the time comes for the Jankunu to “turn out,” as the expression goes. Down at the two main family graveyards, the ancestral spirits are fed with white rice, the blood of a chicken, and a specially-prepared concoction known as “egg punch” (a drink that was closely associated with Christmas festivities in Jamaica during the 19th century). Back up at the dancing ground, the myal-man and his assistants remove the sheet from the Jankunu, and carry the house headdress out into the open for all to see, placing it on a bench in the center of the community dance-ground known as Big Yard. Jankunu songs are sung.

Shortly before dawn, the myal-man, with the help of his assistants, hoists the Jankunu onto his head and proceeds down to the cemeteries of Rhoden Town and Brown Town, where he dances and displays his creation, so that its beauty can be enjoyed by the entire community of ancestors.

After daybreak, the crowd moves out onto the road, marching along with the musicians and Jankunu dancer through the different sections of the community while singing yet other songs.

Only after December 25 does the Jankunu ensemble from this community go outside to perform in other communities.

Some time in January, when the Christmas spirit has begun to fade away, the ancestors provide indications that the time has come to “mash up,” or destroy, the house headdress. An all-night Gumbe Play must be held, during which the Jankunu is brought out of its house and

displayed for the last time. The dolls are removed from it, and then the “master” of the Jankunu – the myal-man who built it – carries it on his head down to the cemeteries of Rhoden Town and Brown Town, where he performs a final dance for the ancestors. Before dawn, the Jankunu house headdress is destroyed. Once this ceremony is completed, thoughts of the Jankunu need no longer occupy the community, until the following November, when the cycle begins anew, and the Jankunu builder must once again begin preparations for the approaching Christmas season.

There are several ways we can use presently existing orally-transmitted traditions of the kind I have just summarized to bridge past and present. Consider the 19th-century female performer known as the *maam*, who played a leading role in Jamaican Christmas festivities (as we know from Isaac Belisario’s images and descriptions). In the older variants of Jankunu performed in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica today (though not in the “mainstream” versions backed by fife and drum bands, which are exclusively male), female song leaders and spirit mediums are known by this same name – the *maam*. Or consider the leading dancer who wears the Jankunu house headdress in these older, rural versions (and whose 19th-century counterparts, as documented by Belisario and others, similarly played a central role in Jankunu performances in the past). Today, in these older versions, this house-bearing figure is most often a spirit medium who communicates with community ancestors during *myal*, or possession, ceremonies. Although one could conceivably argue that the spiritually charged present-day version of Jankunu in which the *maam* and the dancer bearing a house headdress play a central role might represent an atypical regional development – an anomalous branch of the tradition

that somehow became invested with spiritual meanings after the slavery era – this hardly seems a parsimonious explanation.

The older versions of Jankunu I have touched on here, which are full of clear and incontestable spiritual meanings, suggest the need for an alternative history of the Jankunu tradition – a history that relies less on written documents left by outside observers, most of whom had little understanding of what they were describing, and more on the traces of the past to be found in the everyday practices of people whose spiritual lives have remained close to those of their ancestors. Only by listening to the few remaining practitioners of these older forms can we gain access to a world of meaning that was largely hidden from the Europeans and white Americans who left written records of life on Caribbean and American slave plantations. These last holdouts of old-style Jankunu in the present are uniquely positioned to help us understand what these complex Afro-creole performances really were – which is to say, what they meant to those who practiced and cherished them in earlier times. By listening to those in the Caribbean who have continued to celebrate Christmas and the New Year with the ancestors, we can better understand the enduring spirit of Jankunu and related festivities.

NOTES

¹ Lack of agreement as to the proper spelling of *Jankunu* creates further confusion. Some of the many spellings that one encounters in historical sources include John Connú, John Canoe, Johnny Canoe, Joncanoe, Jonkanoo, Jancunoo, Jankoono, John Kuner, and John Kooner, and in modern writings, Jonkonnu and Junkanoo. According to the Jamaican lexicographer Frederic Cassidy, the most common spellings of the term represent “educated” renderings that do not accurately reflect its actual pronunciation by practitioners; he states that ‘Jankunu’ is a truer rendering of its “folk” pronunciation, at least in Jamaica (Cassidy 1966: 47, 51). To suggest common origins and the continuing relatedness of all the traditions going by variants of this same name, I use a single spelling, ‘Jankunu,’ throughout this essay. This spelling more accurately reflects the pronunciation of the word that I, like Cassidy, have heard practitioners almost everywhere use (/jáŋkunu/) than do the usual spellings of John Canoe, Jonkonnu, Junkanoo, etc. (The exception is the Bahamas, where I most often heard /jáŋkanu/.) In quoted passages I retain the original spellings unless otherwise noted.

² This epistemological terrain has been explored in innovative ways in the work of Richard Price on the Saramaka Maroons of Suriname (e.g., Price 1983, 1990) – whose influence on my own thinking will be apparent here – and has also been a primary area of concern in some of my own work on Jamaican Maroons (e.g., Bilby 1995, 1997, 2005).

³ The results of this comparative research are discussed in a forthcoming book chapter (Bilby forthcoming a), and will be presented in greater detail in a book on which I am presently at work (Bilby forthcoming b).

⁴ The following description is based on ethnographic fieldwork in St. Elizabeth parish, Jamaica in 1991 and 2004-5. Further information on this old version of Jamaican Jankunu can be found in Bilby (1999, 2007, forthcoming a, forthcoming b).

REFERENCES

Abrahams, Roger D., and John F. Szwed, eds. 1983. *After Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Barnett, Sheila. 1979. Jonkonnu Pitchy Patchy. Jamaica Journal 43:18-32.

Beckwith, Martha Warren. 1928. Christmas Mummings in Jamaica. New York: American Folk-Lore Society.

Bethel, E. Clement. 1991. Junkanoo: Festival of the Bahamas. London: Macmillan.

Bettelheim, Judith. 1979. The Afro-Jamaican Jonkonnu Festival: Playing the Forces and Operating the Cloth. Ph.D. dissertation. Yale University.

----- . 1988. Jonkonnu and other Christmas Masquerades. In Caribbean Festival Arts, edited by John W. Nunley and Judith Bettelheim, 39-83. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Bilby, Kenneth. 1995. Oral Traditions in Two Maroon Societies: The Windward Maroons of Jamaica and the Aluku Maroons of French Guiana and Suriname. In Born out of Resistance: On Caribbean Cultural Creativity, edited by Wim Hoogbergen, 169-80. Utrecht: ISOR.

----- . 1997. Swearing by the Past, Swearing to the Future: Sacred Oaths, Alliances, and Treaties among the Guianese and Jamaican Maroons. Ethnohistory 44(4):655-689.

----- . 1999. Gumbay, Myal, and the Great House: New Evidence on the Religious Background of Jonkonnu in Jamaica. ACIJ Research Review (African-Caribbean Institute of Jamaica) 4:47-70.

----- . 2005. True-Born Maroons. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

----- . 2007. More than Met the Eye: African-Jamaican Festivities in the Time of Belisario. In Art and Emancipation in Jamaica, edited by Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, 120-135. New Haven: Yale Center for British Art and Yale University Press.

----- . Forthcoming a. Surviving Secularization: Masking the Spirit in the Jankunu (John Canoe) Festivals of the Caribbean and the Southern United States. In Black Music

Scholarship and the Bridging of Diasporal Sacred Worlds, edited by Samuel Floyd, Jr. and Shannon Dudley. Berkeley: University of California Press.

----- . Forthcoming b. Christmas with the Ancestors: Raising Holiday Spirits in the Caribbean and the Southern United States. Book ms., in preparation.

Brathwaite, Edward (Kamau). 1972. The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

----- . 1990. Ala(r)ms of God – Konnu and Carnival in the Caribbean. Caribbean Quarterly 36(3/4):77-107.

Brodber, Erna. 1983. Oral Sources and the Creation of a Social History of the Caribbean. Jamaica Journal 16(4):2-11.

Burton, Richard D.E. 1997. Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Cassidy, Frederic G. 1966. “Hipsaw” and “John Canoe.” American Speech 41(1):45-51.

Craton, Michael. 1995. Decoding Pitchy-Patchy: The Roots, Branches and Essence of Junkanoo. Slavery and Abolition 16(1):14-44.

Dirks, Robert. 1975. Slaves’ Holiday. Natural History 84(10):84-90.

----- . 1979. John Canoe: Ethnohistorical and Comparative Analysis of a Carib Dance. Actes du XLIIIe Congrès International des Américanistes 6:487-501.

----- . 1987. The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and Its Ritual Expression on British West Indian Slave Plantations. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Dirks, Robert and Virginia Kerns. 1975. John Canoe. National Studies (Belize) 3(6):1-15.

Epstein, Dena J. 1977. Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Fabre, Geneviève. 1994. Festive Moments in Antebellum African American Culture. In *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*, edited by Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich, 52-63. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Fenn, Elizabeth A. 1988. "A Perfect Equality Seemed to Reign": Slave Society and Jonkonnu. *North Carolina Historical Review* 65:127-153.

Hill, Errol. 1992. The Jamaican Stage, 1655-1900: Profile of a Colonial Theatre. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Levine, Lawrence W. 1977. Black Culture and Black Consciousness. New York: Oxford University Press.

MacMillan, Dougald. 1926. John Kuner. Journal of American Folklore 39:53-57.

Patterson, Orlando. 1969 [1967]. The Sociology of Slavery. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Price, Richard. 1983. First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

----- . 1990. Alabi's World. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Reid, Ira de A. 1942. The John Canoe Festival. Phylon 3:349-370.

Roberts, Helen H. 1924. Some Drums and Drum Rhythms of Jamaica. *Natural History* 24(2):241-251.

Rommen, Timothy. 1999. Home Sweet Home: Junkanoo as National Discourse in the Bahamas. *Black Music Research Journal* 19(1):71-92.

Ryman, Cheryl. 1984. Jonkonnu: A Neo-African Form. Jamaica Journal 17(1):13-23; (2):50-61.

Sands, Rosita M. 1991. Carnival Celebrations in Africa and the New World: Junkanoo and the Black Indians of Mardi Gras. Black Music Research Review 11(1):75-92.

Stuckey, Sterling. 1987. Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America. New York: Oxford University Press.

Walser, Richard. 1971. His Worship, the John Kuner. North Carolina Folklore Journal 19(4):160-172.

Werthwein, Linda. 2000. John Kooner – Revisited. North Carolina Folklore Journal 47(2):111-118.

Williams, Cyrnic R. 1826. A Tour through the Island of Jamaica from the Western to the Eastern End in the Year 1823. London: Hunt and Clarke.

Wisdom, Keith Gordon. 1985. Bahamian Junkanoo: An Act in a Modern Social Drama. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Georgia, Athens.

Wood, Vivian Nina Michelle. 1995. Rushin' Hard and Runnin' Hot: Experiencing the Music of the Junkanoo Parade in Nassau, Bahamas. Ph.D. dissertation. Indiana University.

Wynter, Sylvia. 1970. Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process. Jamaica Journal 4(2): 34-48.