

Ecstasy in Junkanoo, A Public Celebration of Freedom

by Keith G. Wisdom

Bahamian Junkanoo is an individual and community celebration of freedom. The origins of the parade are shrouded in mystery. Though there is little doubt that they are West African, their meaning has been transformed by successive generations to bring fresh significance to the festival. The name "Junkanoo" itself suggests connections with Jamaican Jonkonnu and similar festivals throughout the New World.

Bahamian Junkanoo is now a national parade. Held from 2:00 - 8:00 a.m. on December 26th and January 1st, the Junkanoo parade is a judged event with three main prize categories: best music, best costume, and best overall group presentation. Today's Junkanoo presentations are organized around particular themes, which are expressed in coordinated costumes, music, and dance, the three main artistic elements of Bahamian Junkanoo. Junkanoo participants in today's Junkanoo parade (drummers, cowbell ringers, horn players, dancers, designers, and builders) continually re-create and develop these basic elements. Not all Junkanoo participants are organized or serious about prize money, however, and many simply want to be seen. Nevertheless, they all, practitioners and spectators alike, have a Junkanoo experience, including in many cases moments of ecstasy.

The practitioners and spectators of contemporary Bahamian Junkanoo represent a broad cross section of the Bahamian population, to which is added a small percentage of visitors, since the Junkanoo event occurs during the Bahamian winter tourist season. Elements of Junkanoo are also presented outside of The Bahamas, as cultural performances. Junkanoo comes to the world stage this summer, with presentations and demonstrations and a gigantic Junkanoo Rush-Out as part of the Festival on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on the Fourth of July. This project has been wholeheartedly supported by the Honorable Brent Symonette, Minister of Tourism,

who recognizes the vast potential of this art form.

Although Junkanoo is practiced in the islands of New Providence, Grand Bahama, Eleuthera, Bimini, and Abaco, the most organized and vibrant exhibitions of this performance art are seen in New Providence and Grand Bahama. New Providence Junkanoo, the best example of modern Bahamian Junkanoo, is the focus of this article.

JUNKANOO TIME

"Junkanoo time" in The Bahamas is an almost magical time at the year's end that exemplifies the spirit of Christmas, the idea that anything is possible. Junkanoo is also a time when the individual is free from a number of institutional, personal, and family obligations. A Bahamian form of organized play, in which new symbolic worlds are generated, Junkanoo exists "out of" and in contrast to "normal" time.

JUNKANOO PRACTITIONERS

Bahamian Junkanoo today involves some 15 adult groups representing roughly every area in New Providence and Grand Bahama. Unlike in times past, group members do not have to live in or belong in some way to the area being represented, although most group members do have some kind of relationship with their represented area. The major or "super" groups in Junkanoo currently are the Saxons Superstars, the Valley Boys, the Roots, and the newly founded One Family. These groups have their base camps or "shacks" in various parts of New Providence or Grand Bahama and so are said to represent those areas. However, the major cohesive factor among members of these groups is rather a shared belief in each other and the collective attitude their assembled personal philosophies engender.

Alongside these organized groups are the "scrapers," the other primary type of participants in Bahamian Junkanoo. Scrap groups are made up of individuals who are minimally costumed and are only on the parade route to "rush" (a Junkanoo



marching style) and have a good time. Scrapppers are not interested in prize money, organization, or group thematic presentation. Today the Junkanoo scrapper represents the pre-1950s style of Junkanoo performance and attitude. Members of the major groups, on the other hand, represent the modern style of Junkanoo, whose complex and colorful paper costumes visually dominate the event. Both men and women participate in Junkanoo, although its administration and creation are totally male dominated.

THE JUNKANOO PARADE

The Junkanoo event has four distinct phases: Presentation, Judgement, Celebration (or last lap), and Transition. In the Presentation phase, major groups establish an intense performance pace, concentrating on the production of the group's own unique "Junkanoo beat," that is, repetitive, dominating notes of the Goombay drum. During the Judgement phase, which reaches its climax at daybreak, lead and dancer costumes are "displayed" – spun and raised up and down rhythmically – while the remainder of the group constantly reorganizes the space of the parade route through the execution of a number of previously rehearsed group marching configurations. Judges make their final choices during this period.

Winners are announced just after the Celebration phase. In this short phase, beginning around 7:30 a.m., groups and spectators alike have decided who they think the winners will be. The Celebration phase is marked by the energetic, almost frantic rushing pace that the major groups, and especially the presumed winners, adopt. This burst of energy also marks the beginning of the final phase, Tran-

Today Junkanoo costumes are made of cardboard and tissue paper. Each group has its own theme, which remains a secret until the day of the rush.
Photo courtesy The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism

sition, which occurs shortly before the "official" end of the Junkanoo event. The energy level on the parade route drops drastically, and discarded costume pieces litter the entire Bay Street portion of the parade route. (The practice of leaving costumes on the parade route has been discouraged in recent years. A permanent museum, The Junkanoo Expo, was established in 1993 under the leadership of the Honorable Algernon S. B. P. Allen, Minister of Youth and Culture, to display and preserve these magnificent pieces close to the parade route.) Symbolically, this phase represents the transition of the entire Junkanoo setting from metaphor and liminality to its normal status as commercial banking and shopping district.

JUNKANOO COSTUMES

The costumes of major Junkanoo groups have continued to grow in size and complexity. In some instances costume designers begin preparations seven to 12 months in advance. Groups strive for originality and excellence in the presentation of a theme to be carried out, in various levels of detail, by all members of the group. Costume construction takes place mainly in high-ceilinged enclosures, the shacks which serve as the groups' base camps. The interior of the shacks are open, dry, and can be locked or partitioned off, as organized groups prefer that their costume designs be seen only on parade days.



Above: Junkanoo costumes reflected the successful sponge industry of the early 20th century. When a blight ended the sponge supply in 1940, shredded paper became the main material of Junkanoo costumes. Right: A Junkanoo reveler celebrates in Nassau, 1942. As the visual aspects of Junkanoo became increasingly important, shredded paper was soon replaced with more colorful tissue paper, and eventually, with the crepe paper that is used today.

Photos by Ira De A. Reid, courtesy Department of Archives, The Bahamas



JUNKANOO MUSIC

Junkanoo music is indispensable to the Junkanoo experience, fueling the event by stimulating participants and spectators alike. The basic beat and variety of rhythmic patterns in Junkanoo music remain very much the same as they have always been. However, the older practice of singing in Junkanoo has been replaced by chants, and melodic instruments such as the tuba, trumpet, saxophone, and trombone have been added to the traditional Junkanoo instruments (Goombay drum, cowbell, whistles, bicycle horns, conch shell, foghorn). These new instruments, which are played in tune with the traditional ones, are separated physically in the group marching formation.

JUNKANOO DANCE

In modern Bahamian Junkanoo, as well as in traditional Junkanoo, a number of movements are usually done one after another and, to the Junkanoo newcomer, may appear to be a kind of dance. What is called "Junkanoo dance" is not a dance form like ballet or modern jazz but is any quick, rhythmic movement that is consistently repeated to create a

noticeable pattern. The patterns consist of turns, spins, hops, skips, jumps, and lunges and are mostly performed by group leaders, group dancers, and linesmen who function as group marshals for major Junkanoo groups. Coordinated and choreographed contemporary dance steps are seen today in Junkanoo, but they were copied from Jr. Junkanoo groups.

Today, the best-known Junkanoo dancers are the leaders of the two principal Junkanoo groups, Percy "Vola" Francis of the Saxons Superstars and Winston "Gus" Cooper of the Valley Boys. Both of these individuals perform a recognizable set of movements during the Junkanoo parades each year, movements which outside of the Junkanoo context are quite meaningless. Such movements or steps can occur at any time and place during the parade march, and are seen as traditional or "natural" Junkanoo steps or movements. In contrast, the coordinated, choreographed dance steps must be performed only in predetermined sections of the group marching formation and at specific locations along the parade route.

Together, the parade's main artistic elements - cos-

tume design, music, and dance - create a "Theater of Junkanoo," whose dramatic impact motivates and influences many other Bahamian art forms.

THE ECSTATIC MOMENT

Both scrappers and members of major groups place a high value on the Junkanoo experience, and both undergo ecstatic moments, especially during the Judgement phase of the Junkanoo event.

The individual scrapper does not belong to any single group, and so his ecstatic moments occur only when he is a part of a loosely organized, transitory scrap gang that has established a fairly consistent group beat. Like the member of a major group, the scrapper experiences ecstatic moments created in large part by his "self-produced" Junkanoo beat.

The scrapper's ecstatic moments sometimes involve his interacting with spectators, but never with the members of a major group. While experiencing an ecstatic moment the scrapper relates directly to others, appearing to understand other scrappers and spectators in an empathetic rather than a sympathetic way. That is, Junkanoo scrappers appear not to "feel for" one another but rather to "feel together." The ecstatic moments of the scrapper seem to result from singularly group-related interactions which produce "communitas," a feeling of oneness within a community.

Communitas is achieved here via immersion in rhythmic activity, peculiar in that it can be strived for but cannot be precisely planned.

The ecstatic moments of the member of a major Junkanoo group differ from the scrapper's in three basic ways. First, group members describe their ecstatic moments as a more individual or personal experience which occurs in public; they are aware of the group and their duty and responsibility to it, yet feel connected via the gang to an experience (called being "in the beat") much greater than the group experience of the gang. Secondly, even though the major group member is aware of Junkanoo spectators and is very much affected by them, unless he is a group leader, he does not relate directly to them. Lastly, Junkanoo music for the major group member works more as a catalyst than a stimulus. His ecstatic moments seem very much like the experience that a number of anthropolo-

gists, for example Victor Turner and Jonathan Hill, characterize as "flow." Flow in this sense involves "pleasure" in subordination to ritual forms, a spontaneous and individual joy in expressing oneself through a loss of self in disciplined actions. In fact, it may be an almost addictive pleasure within disciplined performance communities.

The ecstatic moments that are achieved by the scrappers and the major group members symbolize two forms of freedom. The scrappers in modern Bahamian Junkanoo embody the freedom to spontaneously create an environment in which undisciplined play can occur. To the major group members, on the other hand, Junkanoo grants them the freedom to construct a complex, formal, disciplined celebration.

Ecstatic moments enrich the overall event experience of primary Junkanoo participants and add another dimension to the cultural inversion that occurs within the setting of the Junkanoo event. More importantly, perhaps, it is these ecstatic moments that make Junkanoo even more interesting for spectators; while they are going through their ecstatic moments, primary Junkanoo participants raise the intensity of their performance. The ecstatic power of Junkanoo creates a personal linkage between indigenous participants and spectators, and with the culture and history they themselves create.

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