

Jonkonnu in North Carolina

Harry McKown, "December — Jonkonnu in North Carolina (see <http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/ref/nchistory/dec2008/index.html>)," *This Month in North Carolina History*, December 2008.

PROVIDED BY UNC LIBRARIES / NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION



Figure 1. The "rag man" in a Jonkonnu reenactment at Bellamy Mansion in Wilmington, North Carolina.

In antebellum North Carolina, Christmas season was the time for an African American celebration found almost nowhere else in North America, but widespread through the islands of the Caribbean. Variouslly called Jonkonnu, Johnkannaus, John Coonah, or John Canoe, the custom was described in the slave community of Jamaica in the late eighteenth century where it was thought to have been of African origin. Although the details often changed from place to place, Jonkonnu usually involved several African American men who dressed in costumes made of rags and animal skins with grotesque masks and horns. Sometimes one of their number wore his best clothes instead. They danced wildly, often playing musical instruments and singing. In towns, the Jonkonnu men went from house

to house while on plantations they performed at the homes of masters, overseers, and other white people. They expected to be rewarded with gifts of money or liquor. Jonkonnu dancers were often accompanied by crowds of men and women who cheered them on while taking no direct part in the performance.

Jonkonnu obviously represented a time of release and enjoyment for slaves from the drudgery of their day-to-day work. Some historians believe that it may also have been a time when the constraints of the slave system were loosened in other ways. On plantations in North Carolina slaves of all sorts had access to their masters in ways that they seldom had during the year. The Jonkonnu performers and their accompanying crowd usually came right up to their master's house, a privilege usually denied to all but house servants. After the performance, the master would often speak to the performers and shake hands with them, another departure from usual practice. Jonkonnu continued in North Carolina after emancipation, at least in Wilmington, where it was observed as late as 1880. A version of it also seems to have been adopted by whites in the late nineteenth century. In the end, however, it may have been too closely tied to the slave system in which it arose to have survived long after freedom.

On the web

A reenactment

<http://www.presnc.org/Community/Jonkonnu-Celebration-at-Bellamy-Mansion>

Bellamy Mansion in Wilmington staged a Jonkonnu celebration in December 2007.

Jonkonnu celebrations in North Carolina and beyond

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/6527>

In this lesson plan, students read two articles about Jonkonnu, an African American and Afro-Caribbean celebration among slave populations with origins in West Africa. Students complete a graphic organizer comparing Jonkonnu in North Carolina, Belize, and Jamaica.

More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including African Americans, North Carolina, antebellum, celebrations, history, and slavery.

Image credits

More information about these images and higher-resolution files are linked from the original web version of this document.

Figure 1 (page 1)

Photo by Preservation NC. All Rights Reserved.