

Stephen Rowley, *Bajan Mummings: Have they lost the plot?* Mummings Unconvention, 2011.

Bajan Mummings: Have they lost the plot?

This paper introduces the Barbadian (also colloquially known as ‘Bajan’) traditions of Tuk bands and the costume characters that accompany them. It also considers the related traditions of ‘Landship’ and ‘Scrubbers’. Tuk bands and their characters are described along with their mode and context of performance. The origins of the traditions are explored prior to a discussion of their possible relationship to the mumming plays of Britain. The material for this paper was collected during fieldwork research in 2001 and 2002.

Culturally, Barbados has long been known as ‘Little England’, as a result of many generations of British political and cultural leaders introducing aspects of their own values and customs into Caribbean Society¹.

Barbados is probably best known for ‘Banja’, its calypso tradition which operates as a competitive process. In each parish a calypso ‘tent’ is set-up and the local calypsonians come to sing their latest composition, hoping to win through to the final. The final is held in the main stadium during the August ‘Crop Over’ festival. The winner is named Calypso Monarch of the Year. In the true spirit of the calypso, the songs usually reflect issues in society and often call the politicians to account. Over the last 10 years or more there has been a movement for the Bajan people to reconnect with their African roots and this is a feature of much of the local entertainment provided for tourists. Such shows frequently feature displays of African drumming and dancing. Alongside the African element one can also find the Tuk tradition which features a small band of musicians plus an entourage of costumed characters. Tuk appears to be uniquely Bajan, but has some similarities to other Caribbean traditions.

Tuk band

The Tuk band typically consists of a solo whistle (locally known as a ‘flute’) playing melody. The preferred instrument is usually a Clarke’s tin whistle. The flute player is accompanied by a rhythm section of two or three players. There is always a ‘kittle’ or ‘kettle’ drum which is snare drum. The snare drum may be augmented by a bass (‘great’

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or ‘boom boom’) drum, a triangle (‘steel’ or ‘metal’) and/or a cowbell. The drums are worn in such a manner so they can be played as the musicians walk along.

The instruments are as cheap as they can be. The Clarkes tin whistle is one of the cheapest melody instruments one can buy. The snare and bass drums are usually hand-made using whatever materials are to hand. The traditional Bajan kittle drum has a plywood shell, goat skin and hoops made from tamarind canes. Great drums are similarly made, although they use the rims of bicycle wheels for hoops². A triangle is made by bending a metal rod, and a cowbell, is a cowbell.



Figure One: A Tuk Band:

photograph – the author

The music consists of popular tunes and songs from the shows (e.g. Edelweiss), although there are also traditional melodies and folk tunes, including some C18th/C19th English tunes such as the hornpipe, Harvest Home. Christmas is a special time for Tuk music and

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they have an extensive repertoire of carols and popular Christmas songs, such as ‘White Christmas’³.

A unique element of the music is the use of rhythm. There are three main rhythms waltz, march (4/4) and ‘fassie’ (6/8 march). These are played in a military style which is overlain by improvisation on the kittle drum. This improvisation has been interpreted as being an influence of African rhythms⁴.

The derivation of the name ‘Tuk’ is not clear. Janice Millington, the leading expert on music in Barbados suggests two possible origins, both onomatopoeic. The first being in relation to its role as the engine of the Landship (see below) and imitating the tuk, tuk, tuk of a marine engine. The second is comes from the Scottish word *Touk*, meaning to beat a drum⁵.

The Tuk bands are often accompanied by a retinue of costumed characters. Shaggy Bear is a man dressed in a costume of tatters: tatters trousers, tatters jacket and a tatters hat or tatters balaclava. In one case it was clear that the costume was based upon a one-piece boiler suit. The tight fitting costume allows the character to perform quite athletic jumps and dances, often using moves that we might describe as ‘urban street dance’. Tiltman (Stilt man) dances upon stilts. Mother Sally was originally a man dressed as a woman, with a very padded costume to enhance his/her bosom and ‘bubble-ups’ (derriere). In the past he/she also wore a mask and is usually played as a ‘superior’ woman. Steel Donkey is a hobby horse of the tourney horse type, made with a frame of steel fencing wire covered with fabric. The head is made of painted canvas stretched over the wire frame and usually has a wild look. Green Monkey wears a tatters costume like the Shaggy Bear, but totally green. He interacts with the audience in a cheeky way, playing tricks and performing antics in a monkey-like fashion. Today the role of these performers with the Tuk band is largely to dance and entertain the audience. They often combine with dancers from other cultures, especially doing the limbo. Originally all the characters were men, but in the current tourism context Mother Sally and Steel Donkey are often played by a woman. At the time of my fieldwork the sequence above indicates the frequency of

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appearance and importance of the characters. Green monkey was rarely seen, whilst Shaggy Bear and Tiltman were the most frequent

Landship

Landship is another uniquely Barbadian, or Bajan, tradition.

Although its origins are not documented, the popular story tells of a Bajan sailor, Moses Wood or Ward, who had risen to a high position in the Royal Navy. On his retirement he returned to Barbados and realised the need for some form of social welfare to provide for people who were unable to work through age, sickness and ill-health. He started a movement of Landship societies. These were local friendly societies, into which one paid a small weekly subscription to provide financial help should they need it in the future. The Landship societies met weekly and were organised along the lines of a ship's crew, with a captain at the helm⁶.

A feature of the landship meetings was military drill. The members would form up in ranks shaped like a ship, with a prow and a stern, and bridge. Under orders, the landship would set off down the road on 'manoeuvres' with commands shouted from the bridge. This way they would march up and down the streets, negotiate corners and dock. The style of marching, although well executed, became one of exaggerated movements whilst sticking out one's posterior. The onlooker might detect a possible element of 'mocking' former British slave-owners. The Tuk band became involved in the Landship movement, playing suitable music for their manoeuvres. They have been described as the 'engine' of the landship. The landship tradition has been on the wane for many years, but it leaves a strong legacy of friendly societies in the country.

Origins of Tuk

The origins of Tuk music may go back as far as the C17th. The plantation owners were suspicious of the African slaves performing their own drumming and dancing. They felt

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that it reinforced the African identity of the slave and it was feared that drums could be used subversively to communicate information and organise revolt. The governors introduced an act of parliament in 1688 that amongst other things banned the playing of African drums⁷. In the place of the drumming and dancing, the slave owners may have introduced marching fife and drum bands and military drill in order to enforce a British identity and sense of discipline. Certainly by the C19th the military garrison had a marching band composed of Barbadians of African descent⁸.

It has been proposed that after the emancipation of the slaves, their musical culture had more in common with the military music they had played, rather than the African culture they left behind some 300 years earlier. On very little money they were able to make small military style bands themselves. C19th descriptions indicate that perhaps the violin was the main melody element, but the snare and bass drum were as we have today⁹.

Performance and context

These days Tuk bands and dancers perform primarily for the tourist audience. It may be true to say that the invention of the jet airliner has saved the tradition, allowing Barbados to develop as popular holiday destination. Since the 1960s, the tourist industry has provided work for Tuk musicians and dancers in hotel and resort shows. Otherwise, most Bajan people seem to be unconcerned about the fate of this aspect of their culture. Like morris dancing in the UK, most people could identify it, but none would go out of their way to see it.

However, some of the older generation harbour some feeling of identity with Tuk. From them one records fond memories of performances in the immediate post WWII period, i.e. before the tourist boom.

There were four main contexts for performance: Rum shops; Landship; Bank Holidays and Christmas house visiting. Every neighbourhood had a rum shop, and many still exist. They were the main bars of the community. They had a bad reputation, and

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perhaps by association the musicians that played there were similarly tainted. I did not identify any example of the Tuk characters performing at the rum shops.

Landship clearly had a Tuk music association, with the band as the engine of the ship and providing the beat for marching. Apart from their weekly meetings, Landship groups performed in processions, festivals, parades and other occasions, especially at the funeral of a member. Again, these performances seem to have been mainly for the Tuk band without the Tuk characters.

On bank holidays the characters came into their own, performing to entertain the promenading families. Indeed two of the characters were sometimes called, Bank Holiday Bear, and Bank Holiday Stiltman. In this environment we find the Tuk band and characters performing together.

Over the night of Christmas Eve and Christmas Morning, the Tuk entourage (band and characters), would wander around the streets of their neighbourhood, visiting houses where they would be given a bit of cake, a drink of rum and some money. It was considered to be lucky to be visited by the Tukkers. The group would play late into the night, and if the householders had already gone to bed, they would leave the rum and cake on the veranda or a windowsill. In the morning, the band and characters would entertain the folks going to church, and later as they enjoyed their bank holiday walking in the parks¹⁰. Today these have been replaced with one major performance context – tourist shows.

The ‘Scrubbers’ are another Christmas house visiting tradition. Either individually or in groups, they would stand outside each house. The ‘Speechman’ would then make an announcement in praise of the household, often beginning “Master and mistress of this noble cottage...”. They may continue with hymns or carols and receive money and or food in return¹¹.

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Origins of the costume characters



Figure Two: Shaggy Bear

photograph the author

If you ask the performers themselves, they will tell you that the Tuk band is about African rhythms and the costume characters are African in origin. The following explanations were given to the author by practitioners. First, that Shaggy Bear represents an African shaman or witch doctor. This seems largely based upon the similarity between the tatters coat and the coat of leaves that some shamans wear. Tilt Man is explained as a tradition brought over from West Africa with the slaves. Steel Donkey is said to be a religious character derived from embroidered coats of the famous horse-

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riding Hausa tribes in Northern Nigeria¹². In the 1950s the Steel Donkey sometimes carried chains and rattled them to evoke the 'haunted house spirits'¹³. Other commentators consider the character to be simply a representative of the main method of transportation in earlier times. Mother Sally is an African character representing female fertility. Green Monkey is a character from the jungles of Africa, but takes his name directly from a species of monkey found on the island which was probably imported from Senegal more than 300 years ago. Its greenish tinge may come from algae in its fur. However, these suggested African origins can be questioned in every case.

In the case of Shaggy Bear there are clearly no bears in Africa. The name 'bear' may have come from the fact that bear-baiting was known on the island¹⁴. There is no significant aspect of the Shaggy Bear tatters coat that makes it more like a shamanic coat of leaves than the English tatters coat to which it appears identical. There is no indication that the Jamaican character of Pitchy Patchy Man, or the other Jonkonnu characters are of African origin. Current representations of Tiltman in 'Folklore Shows' are based on African stilt walking and stilt dancing but earlier descriptions of Tiltman do not reflect this style. It is reported that 50 years ago Tiltman would be on shorter stilts and often dressed as a Bajan woman. There is other evidence of Tiltman dressed in a formal black coat and hat. The name Mr. Harding was known to be applied to him. In the case of Steel Donkey it should be noted that although the Hausa have a strong tradition of horse riding there is no evidence of this being transformed into a tradition of tourney hobby horses. Formally at least, Steel Donkey has great similarity to European tourney horses. There is no specific evidence to support the Mother Sally character as representing a specific female fertility character. Indeed, the character is played in a manner very similar to the comedic man/woman of the English mummings.

Similarities with English Mummings

An alternative view is that these characters could be derived completely or in part from English mummer's plays. Shaggy Bear – a man in a tatters coat – is reminiscent of any English mummings character. There are two possibilities for Tiltman. First, and based upon his height, he may be derived from the character of the 'giant' that appears in many

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English hero-combat plays. Secondly, the 'Mr. Harding' version dressed in black frock coat and top hat may derive from the Doctor character in many mummings' plays. It has already been mentioned that the Steel Donkey is formally similar to the tourney hobby horse which usually accompanies the doctor. Mother Sally is like the man/woman character found in many English mummings plays, for example Sabina the King of Egypt's daughter, or the female characters of the wooing plays. Green Monkey, like Shaggy Bear above, is a man in tatters – any English mummings character. If this is true it would not be an isolated case. There are other examples of mummings in the Caribbean region for example the 'Mummies' of St Kitts and also in the Dominican Republic. In addition, the characters in Jonkonnu parades have been interpreted as being derived from mummings, containing as they do an entourage of characters, some wearing tatters, and some performing small plays. Curwen Best also notes the similarity between Tuk and the 'mumming' bands of St Kitts, St Nevis and Jamaica¹⁵.

There is also a clear method of transmission in the transport of the indentured servants that came from rural areas of England to work in Barbados in the C18th and early C19th, the peak time of mumming in the UK. After the emancipation, the now freed indentured servants and slaves were living cheek by jowl in the poor communities of Barbados and cultural mixing was inevitable. Furthermore, the performance context of Christmas house visiting is a close parallel to the mumming of the C19th. It could be one of many customs and traditions that were transferred from England to Barbados, from the police uniforms to afternoon tea, to dressing up for church on Sunday. The Scrubbers are another example of a Christmas cadging tradition, and the origins of the Tuk band itself appear to owe more to the English military tradition than to any African roots. Barbados is not called 'Little England' without reason.

This evidence put together points to a plausible explanation of how these characters come to be found performing at Christmas, but it would be much more convincing if we had a St. George meets the Turkish Knight script. Unfortunately, research so far has not uncovered such concrete evidence. However, the following comes from my own field notes.

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I was invited by 'Captain' Vernon Watson O.B.E. to attend an evening performance of traditional music and dance in celebration of the Landship movement. The final part of the show was a landship dance. The dancers marched smartly on in ship formation and went through their manoeuvres: Pull the anchor; Row the boat; Man overboard; Fire on deck. Then the crew stood to attention for an inspection by a captain. As the captain walked up and down the rows, one of the sailors wobbled in a drunken manner and fell to the ground. He lay prostrate on the ground. The captain called for a doctor. One of the crew dressed as nurse, rushed over and went through a mummer's quack doctor routine of inspecting the body, lifting a leg, pushing it down, only for another limb to shoot up, etc. Then taking a bottle from her jacket, the nurse took a swig and then gave the patient one to revive him.

This was all played out in a semi-improvised manner that most people familiar with English mumming in contemporary times would recognise as the 'quack doctor reviving the slain or injured knight' scene as it is performed today in English hero-combat mummies plays.

Where did this piece of action come from? It could have been the result of someone coming to Barbados and teaching several specific lazzi from the Commedia del'Arte tradition, but the completeness of the scene indicates it is more likely that it came from the mumming tradition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have some interesting evidence to support the idea that the Tuk characters may represent the remnants of Mumming. A cast of characters most of which have direct parallels in the English mummies play; a Christmas street and house visiting context; Tatters costumes; a 'Doctor reviving the corpse' scene in Landship; a Street music tradition connected with other mummies traditions in the Caribbean; a related 'Scrubbers' house visiting tradition and finally a channel of transmission through the indentured servants. Each piece of evidence on its own would probably not be significant,

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but the assemblage makes the theory plausible. There is clearly much more work to be done to examine these in detail.

The likelihood of finding a mumming play script might be slight, but one can hope that amongst the older inhabitants, who remember the times between the wars, there might be one who can recite some rhyming couplets about seeking the dragon's blood.

Tuk had been on the decline since WWII, identified with rum shops and the people who hang around them, but the future of Tuk has been greatly enhanced by the involvement of one entertainer, Wayne 'Poonka' Whillock. Poonka was a primary teacher and a well-known Calypso singer. In the mid-1990s he decided that this half-forgotten tradition called Tuk had potential as a focal point for Bajan identity. He formed a traditional Tuk band with characters to play for tourists. He set up an arts project working across Barbados schools teaching Tuk band playing, Stilt dancing and Landship. In addition he took elements of Soca, the high-energy, popular form of Calypso, and added it to Tuk to create a pop version of Tuk music, with a rock backline and a horn section. Today everyone on Barbados knows about Tuk¹⁶.

Tuk is considered now to be uniquely Bajan and is a key element in the presentation of Bajan culture to tourists. It distinguishes Barbados culturally from the forms of music and dance found in other Caribbean countries. Inspired by Poonka's project the author set up the 'Mum and Tuk' project in 1999. This combines local (English) mummings plays and Bajan music and dance. This has now been delivered into more than 60 UK primary schools.

Notes:

¹ Trevor Marshall, Peggy McGeary and Grace Thompson, *Folk Songs of Barbados*. Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston, Jamaica, 1996.

² Troy Hunt (Tuk musician): Interview with author, March 2002, Princess Margaret Secondary School, Six Roads, St. Philip, Barbados.

³ Wayne Whillock (aka Poonka): Interview with author, March 2002, Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs & Culture, Elsie Payne Complex, Constitution Rd, St. Michael, Barbados.

Stephen Rowley, *Bajan Mummers: Have they lost the plot?* Mummers Unconvention, 2011.

⁴Ibid.

⁵ Janice Millington, (Musician and music teacher): Interview with author, March 2002, Harrison College, Crumpton Street, St. Michael, Barbados.

⁶ Captain Vernon Watson, OBE: Interview with author, March 2002, Barbados Landship Association Dock, My Lord's Hill, St Michael, Barbados.

⁷ Marshall, McGeary, Thompson, op cit.1996.

⁸ Sharon Meredith, 'Barbadian Tuk Music – A fusion of musical cultures' in Annie J Randall (ed.), *Music, Power and Politics*, Routledge 2004.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ Cynthia Forde, (Minister for Education): Interview with author, March 2002, Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs & Culture, Elsie Payne Complex, Constitution Rd, St. Michael, Barbados.

¹¹ Addinton Forde, (Lecturer and folklorist): Interview with author, March 2002, National Cultural Foundation, West Terrace, St. James, Barbados.

¹² Trevor Marshall, (Lecturer and folklorist): Interview with author, March 2002, Barbados Community College, Eyrie Howells' Road, St. Michael, Barbados.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵ Curwen Best, *Roots to popular culture: Barbadian aesthetics: Kamau Braithwaite to hardcore styles*, Macmillan Education, London, 2001. See particularly his chapter on 'Tuk theory, aesthetics (and technology)'.

¹⁶ Whillock, 2002.

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