

## African Masquerades

Masquerades are a very important part of African culture. Initially, in some African cultures, these masquerades formed part of religious ceremonies. When Africans emigrated to other parts of the world, they carried this aspect of culture with them. Some examples of the retention of masquerades in the African diaspora include Egungun masquerades; Jonkonnu in the Bahamas; Crop Over in Barbados; Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, other parts of the Caribbean, and Brazil; Caribana and Cariwest in Canada; and the Notting Hill Carnival in England. In this module, you will learn about the Egungun masquerades, Jonkonnu, and Trinidad and Tobago Carnival.



**Here is a list of activities you will work on:**

- KWL Chart
- Reading
- Research
- Writing
- Listening / Video
- Summary

**KWL Chart**

<b>K</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>L</b>
What I know about African masquerades	What I want to know about African masquerades	What I learned about African masquerades

## **Reading**

A Masquerade ceremony is a cultural or religious rite, festival, procession, or dance involving the wearing of masks. Music, dancing, and costumes including masks are key elements of masquerades. Where the masquerades form a part of a religious rite, it is believed that the music and dance help to create an atmosphere that is conducive to the masqueraders' expression of different spirits. According to Akubor and Awolowo (2016), in most African societies, masquerades are linked to ancestors, good fortune, and ensuring that life in the community runs smoothly.

### **Egungun Masquerades**

*Egungun* is a visible manifestation of the spirits of departed ancestors who periodically revisit the human community for remembrance, celebration, and blessings. It is a unique cultural tradition practiced by the Yoruba of West Africa and their descendants in the African Diaspora, particularly in Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, and the United States. Some people believe that these spirits constantly bless, protect, warn, and punish their earthly relatives depending on how their relatives neglect or honor them.

The appearance of Egungun in a community is invariably accompanied by pomp and pageantry, drumming and dancing, singing and celebration. The ensuing festival goes on for several days and strengthens the bonds that unite families and communities with departed ancestors. The costumes are constructed of a variety of fabrics, both locally woven and industrially manufactured, in addition to metal, beads, leather and bones. Today the fabrics chosen are literally the best that money can buy, and include damask, velvet, silk, Indian madras, and printed cotton. These masquerade performances are often accompanied by the swirling of fabrics and colors, augmented by intricate body movements and carefully orchestrated dance steps.<sup>1</sup> The following photos show two examples of the special clothes worn by people leading the masquerade.

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved 16 Dec 2017 from <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/resonance/44.htm>



Egungun masquerade dance garments<sup>2</sup>

### **Jonkonnu (also spelled John Canoe, John Konno, John Canou)**

John Canoe, or Jonkonnu, is a masquerade derived from enslaved Akan Africans. Jonkonnu was once common in coastal North Carolina and is still practised in the Caribbean on islands that are or were part of the British West Indies, particularly Jamaica and The Bahamas. This masquerade is usually held at Christmas time and varies in style from one country to the next.

There are different explanations for how this masquerade got its name. One explanation is that it is of Akan origin and is dedicated to an Akan warrior called John Kenu from Axim, Ghana.<sup>3</sup> Similar festivals also take place in the coastal region

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egungun>

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved 16 Dec 2017 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junkanoo>

of Ghana, where the advent originally took place, such as the "Fancy Dress Festival" of the Fante people. Another explanation is offered by Douglas Chambers, professor of African studies at the University of Southern Mississippi. He suggests a possible link with the Igbo *Okonko* masking tradition of southern Igboland, which features horned maskers and other masked characters in similar style to Jonkonnu masks.<sup>4</sup>

### **Jonkonnu Characters**

The traditional set of Jonkonnu characters includes the horned Cow Head, Policeman, Horse Head, Wild Indian, Devil, Belly-woman (pregnant woman), Pitchy-Patchy and sometimes a Bride or a House Head, who carries an image of a great house on his head. All are bright, elaborate and colourful. Pitchy-patchy in particular is a striking sight. His costume is made up of strips of brightly coloured cloth. Each character has a special role and sometimes a special dance to perform. For example, Bellywoman is often a man dressed up as a pregnant lady and can always inspire laughter by exaggerating the belly in time with the music. Characters often interact with one another and the music of the drums and fife caused many an onlooker to dance along with the band.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junkanoo>

<sup>5</sup> <http://old.jamaica-gleaner.com/pages/history/story0016.html>



Jonkonnu dancers in Jamaica<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.jamaicaolympics.com/history>

## Trinidad and Tobago Carnival



*Queen of Carnival Competition, Trinidad Carnival, Trinidad & Tobago<sup>7</sup>*

The Trinidad and Tobago Carnival is an annual event held on the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday in Trinidad and Tobago. The event is well known for participants' colorful costumes and exuberant celebrations. In Trinidad and Tobago Carnival is also called "Mas".

The Mas tradition started in the late 18th century with French plantation owners organizing masquerades (mas) and balls before enduring the fasting of Lent. The enslaved Africans, who could not take part in Carnival, formed their own, parallel celebration called "Canboulay". Canboulay (from the French *cannes brulées*, meaning burnt cane) is a forerunner to Trinidad and Tobago Carnival, and has played an

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<sup>7</sup> Retrieved 16 Dec 2017 from <https://blaineharrington.photoshelter.com/image/I0000XsNMIE7xYj0>

important role in the development of the music of Trinidad and Tobago. Calypso and soca music, costumes, and dancing are key elements of Carnival.

Calypso music was developed in Trinidad in the 17th century. It is said to have come from West African types of music such as Kaiso and Canboulay, which were brought by African slaves that were imported to Trinidad to work on sugar plantations. These African slaves were stripped of all connections to their homeland and families and were not allowed to talk to each other. They used Calypso music to mock the slave masters and to communicate with each other. Many early Calypso songs were sung in French Creole. These were usually sung by a local storyteller called a "griot". The griot was also called a chantuelle, and eventually a calypsonian.<sup>8</sup>

The steelpan is a musical instrument that plays a central part in calypso music. African drumming and stick fighting (also called calinda) were banned in 1881 in response to the Canboulay Riots. They were replaced by bamboo "Bamboo-Tambo" sticks beaten together, which were themselves banned in turn. In 1937, they reappeared, transformed as an orchestra of frying pans, dustbin lids and oil drums. These steelpans (or pans) are now a major part of the Trinidadian music scene and are a popular section of the Carnival music contests. Thus, Trinidad Tobago's Carnival survived despite opposition, even developing a new musical instrument, the steel pan. Carnival represents not only fun, but also a struggle by people of African descent to keep their culture.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calypso\\_music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calypso_music)



Playing the steelpan during Trinidad Carnival

**Research Activity A**

Complete the following table about the different musical and cultural components that together make up carnival. You can search carnival on Google and include your own components to the list.

<b>Components of Carnival</b>	<b>Countries of Origin</b>
<b>1. <u>Masks and Costumes</u></b>	
<b>2. <u>Music</u></b> Soca Calypso Reggae Dancehall	
<b>3. <u>Food</u></b> Patties Roti and Curried meats Rice and Peas Jerk Chicken Pop	

**Research Activity B**

Match the phrase on the left to the correct clue on the right.

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Clue</b>
Notting Hill Carnival	This Brazilian city is called the carnival capital of the world
Cariwest	The Edmonton carnival parade usually ends in this location
Soca	This festival in London attracts over 1 million visitors per year, contributing 1 million pounds to Britain's economy
Caribana	This Carnival was started in Edmonton over 30 years ago
Churchill Square	Along with Calypso, this fast-paced music from Trinidad is one of the main types of music played in Carnival
Rio de Janeiro	This carnival started in Toronto in 1967 and is the largest festival of Caribbean culture in North America

### **Writing Activity**

Imagine you are a CBC reporter covering the 2017 Cariwest Carnival in Edmonton. Write a **1 page report** of the events at the carnival. Using the elements in the table above and the short video on Cariwest below, include a description of the costumes, the types of music being played, the dancing, the emotions people are displaying and the food they are likely to be buying.

This short video tells about the origins of Edmonton's Carnival Cariwest

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6jFqZ\\_FFE0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6jFqZ_FFE0)

### **Listening/ Video**

3. This short video tells about the origins of Edmonton's Carnival Cariwest

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6jFqZ\\_FFE0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6jFqZ_FFE0)

4. Video of Jonkunnu in Jamaica

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpVZpswwOtE>

5. Video of Jonkunnu in the Bahamas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzRo17OKexI>

### **Summary**

The masquerades are an example of the retention of African culture in the Caribbean, the Americas, and Europe. Enslaved Africans and Africans who migrated freely to these lands carried their cultural practices and adapted them to their new places of residence. While for the most part the masquerades outside of

Africa have lost their religious significance, most retain the element of theatre and the rhythms of Africa in the use of drums and dance.

### **References**

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