

THE BURU MASQUERADE TRADITION IN JAMAICA

Buru is a recreational, African-derived masquerade (similar to Jonkonnu) which the enslaved population on the plantations in the West Indies practised at Christmastime. Attendant with the masquerade were African-based dancing, drumming and singing.

Buru celebrations usually began on Christmas Eve and continued to New Year's Day. Originally, Buru was used as a fund-raising activity by the enslaved to buy food and other items for their Christmas feast. The performers created a procession in the streets which entertained spectators and passers-by.

The main characters in the Buru masquerade included the Horse-Head, Donkey and Madder (Mother) Lundy. Other characters were gradually introduced, including Cow-Head and Doctor. These characters were all played by men as it was regarded as inappropriate for women to lift their skirts as the dance movements required. Masks were used as part of the costumes to conceal the identity of the wearer. It was necessary for the Buru characters to be masked as often the characters poked fun at individuals or events in the community through song, so the activity was not only entertaining but also served as a type of social commentary.

Today, in Old Harbour Bay, St. Catherine, for example, Buru is practised on Christmas Day and participants spend weeks composing songs which tell of the scandalous behaviour of residents who have to pay the masqueraders to leave or move on.



Old Harbour Bay Buru group at rehearsal



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In this regard, the Buru masquerade also functions as a cleansing mechanism, (a feature which was shared by its West African antecedents), and as a watchdog in the community as the group has a duty to scrutinize the actions and behaviour of fellow community members. Therefore, persons within the community are always mindful of the fact that if they participated in any scandalous activity or displayed similar behaviour, it was possible that they could become the topic of a Buru song.

The Buru group usually consists of about 15 members, who carry on the tradition from retired or deceased family members. The characters are always accompanied by three drummers and other musicians who use scrapers, rattles, and other percussion instruments. The drums used are the fundeh, the repeater, and the bass, which are also used by the Nyahbinghi Order of Rastafari.

In addition to Old Harbour Bay, the Buru was also traditionally practised in Clarendon, in communities such as Bowens and Hayes.