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Last year, during a trip home, I sat down with my grandfather to discuss our family’s history and Bermuda’s history at large. I had a few questions about Bermuda’s traditional dancers, the gombeys, who perform on Boxing Day, New Year’s Day, and other special occasions. Through some preliminary research, I came across some historical writings that suggested that the gombey costumes may have changed considerably right around the time that my grandfather was a child. When I asked him about the significant change in costume and why it might have happened, he looked at me quizzically and replied, without a second thought, that the gombeys had always looked essentially the same.

A symbol of Bermudians’, specifically black Bermudians’, identity and heritage, the gombeys hold a place of pride in the Bermudian ethos. Their long velvet capes covered in mirrors, bells, and ribbons; tall hats topped with peacock feathers; colourful mesh masks; and white shirt and gloves are imposing and even demand a sense of reverence (see Figure 1). Watching the gombeys dance in the streets to a rhythmic drumbeat, one is reminded of the struggle of one’s ancestors and that they too once donned the same costumes and danced the same dances. It feels as if one is witnessing history. But is that really the case? Although the gombeys function as a symbol of Bermudian identity and a representation of black Bermudian heritage today, they did not always look this way. In the early twentieth century the gombeys underwent a significant transformation. This paper explores the various factors that led to this change. Through a combination of myth and mimesis, the new form of gombeys emerged and was accepted as a symbol of Bermuda’s identity. I argue that the new gombeys represent black Bermudians asserting and reclaiming that identity by revealing and rejecting colonial influence on the masquerade tradition, subverting the colonial gaze, and in turn adopting a more authentic mode of representation.
Figure 1: Cushi Ming, *Bermuda Gombey*, 2017, photograph.

Firmly rooted in history, the gombey tradition dates back centuries; however, the costumes worn today bear very little resemblance to those worn in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After a year of forced, unpaid labour, enslaved Bermudians were typically “rewarded” with a few days off during the Christmas season. To celebrate, black Bermudians put on their best clothes, gathered with loved ones, and danced, at times becoming quite raucous. The first written reference of what was most likely a gombey procession appears in a 1709 assize, condemning the “unlawful” slave gathering.¹ By the 1760s, the gombey dance had become a standardized and recognizable tradition. On Christmas Eve night, enslaved Bermudians, most often male, would process from house to house in costume, entertaining the occupants and seeking a bit of money and rum in return. The performers would usually sing songs that ranged from entertaining to subversive.

Although references to the gombeys appeared in newspapers, court reports, and official government documents, a detailed description of the celebration did not appear until 1829 when Suzette Lloyd, a visitor to the island, described the spectacle. In her memoir *Sketches of Bermuda* Lloyd states that “the oldest among them participates with the child in delights of their Gombey—a show which reminds me of the ‘Jack-in-the-Green’ scenes of our May-day chimney-sweepers. Here nature clothes them with their

dusky livery, and they endeavor to heighten the effect by a plentiful bedaubing of red and yellow paints, scarlet cloth, flowers and ribbons.” Given the contemporary image of what a gombey looks like, Lloyd’s description sounds odd. It is difficult to determine if the costumes she witnessed were similar to the ones used today based on the minimal description she provides. However, it is possible to imagine “scarlet cloth, flowers and ribbons” decorating a gombey cape. Any affinity to present day gombey costumes is shattered once one reads H. Carrington Bolton’s 1890 description of the performance:

The men wear their ordinary garments, but are masked, bearing on their heads the heads and horns of hideous-looking beasts (formidable only to an uncultured mind), as well as beautifully made imitations of houses and ships, both lighted by candles. The houses are known as gombay [sic] houses, and are large enough to admit the head of the bearer inserted through a hole below, the building resting on his shoulders; these are more common than the ships, which are full-rigged. All are carefully constructed of wood, cardboard, colored papers, string, etc.

At the turn of the century, gombeys still wore costumes that resembled their original aesthetic. Even as late as 1929, travel writer Bertha March relates witnessing a gombey performance, stating that “one had a strange little house, with lighted candles inside, perched upon his head.” However, by the late 1940s the use of this costume had essentially become extinct, with the new version of the costume embraced as early as 1930. In 1931, the Bermudian magazine published an article detailing the tradition along with an accompanying photograph. A year later, the magazine published another story explaining the significance of the tradition along with additional photographs of the gombeys. While this article acknowledged the original look of the gombey costumes, the illustrations that accompanied it showcased the newer version. The transition from old to new costume was not a sudden shift; in fact, for at least a couple of years, the two forms coexisted. However, it does not appear to have been a harmonious coexistence. Bermudian E. A. McCallan reminisces:

4 William Francis (former Bermudian journalist) in discussion with the author, November 2017.
At this [Christmas] season the gombeys came up from the East End to amuse us and collect pennies. They were the real thing, and not the exotic from the West Indies now accepted by the uninformed as the Bermuda article. These island Gombeys of my youth wore no uniform or fancy dress, they appeared only after sunset, and their chief, if not only, properties were an improvised drum and an illuminated tissue paper-and-frame-house on the head [emphasis added].

Rather than describing the gombey tradition as it is performed today, McCallan’s description of the “real thing” more closely resembles the Jonkonnu tradition celebrated most famously in Jamaica and the Bahamas. Observed during the short respite granted to slaves between Christmas and the New Year, Jonkonnu is a musical, theatrical, and storytelling tradition that began as both a celebration and an outlet for hostilities or aggression. The ritual served as a “legitimate catharsis” that provided enslaved people with an opportunity to vent their frustrations through a medium sanctioned by their masters. During this ambulatory event, participants would dress up as various characters and act out skits, sing songs, and dance to music performed on rudimentary instruments. The songs and skits that the enslaved people performed often poked fun at the slave-owning class and tended to feature “joking insults, playful threats, mock fighting, and other ludic displays of a similar nature.” The leader of the procession, Jaw-Bone or Pitchy-Patchy, would dress in European finery and carry a house or boat on his head, just like Bermuda’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gombeys. Considering the similarity in costume, the Bermuda gombey most likely served the same function as the Jonkonnu tradition.

The similarity between the Christmas celebrations that took place in Bermuda and the Bahamas is not surprising given the considerable contact between the two colonies throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In fact, the island of Eleuthera, Bahamas, was first settled by Bermudian religious dissidents in 1649. In 1670, a group of Bermudians settled the island of New Providence, the only island in the Bahamas where

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6 E. A. McCallan, Life on Old St. David’s Bermuda (Hamilton: Bermuda Historical Society, 1948), 175.
8 Ibid.
9 Virginia Bernhard, Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda, 1616-1782 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 80.
the Jonkonnu tradition is still practiced. Immigration to the island of New Providence continued into the mid-1700s, with a huge influx following a large-scale poison plot by Bermudian slaves in 1731. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Bermudian economy was heavily dependent on maritime trade and privateering. Slaves made up at least a quarter of Bermudian sailing crews as they provided cheap labour and were less likely to desert than freemen. Privateering and trading expeditions put Bermudian slaves “in touch with black communities throughout the Atlantic world, making them links between slave communities and conduits for information, traditions, and material culture.” Given Bermuda’s close ties to the Bahamas and Bermudian slaves’ exposure to the greater Atlantic world, it is not hard to believe that the gombey tradition had its roots in Jonkonnu.

Although the Jonkonnu tradition was originally both celebratory and cathartic, over time slave owners saw an opportunity to use the tradition as yet another means to exert control over their bondsmen. When the Jonkonnu performance first began to take shape, revelers wore masks that featured horns and heads of beasts, reflecting the celebration’s African influence. However, by the late 1800s, British slave owners began funding the celebrations, and thus the costumes started “to reflect the tastes and the fashions of the patrons.” The attempt to “reform” the Bermudian gombeys is best exhibited in the many legislative acts passed in the House of Assembly such as “An Act for the Further and Better Regulating of Negroes and Other Slaves.” Eventually the tradition took on a more European style; horns and bull heads were replaced by houses and ships, and red and yellow face paint was replaced with white mesh masks.

Isaac Mendes Belisario’s series of lithographic prints provide perhaps the most detailed visual documentation of the Jonkonnu tradition. His Jaw-Bone or House John Canoe print serves as a good example of the shift towards a more European style of costume (Figure 2). Nothing about the dancer denotes any African influence. The style of dress is clearly European-inspired, from the cut of the jacket down to the frills at the bottom of the blue and white striped pants. Soft brown curls fall from the house that replaced the

10 Ibid., 117.
12 Ibid., 595.
14 Ibid., 15-16.
African-influenced horns and bull’s head. A white-faced mask that covers the slave’s black face is the most jarring sign of European influence. The mask is not simply white in colour, but also distinctly white in facial features. The broad nose and large lips that stereotypically denote blackness are replaced with a narrow nose and smaller lips. Two round daubs of pink give the mask full, rosy cheeks. European patrons of the new Jonkonnu costumes did not view the change as simply one of aesthetics. Rather they saw it as evidence of a shift in the very nature of the celebration. What was once a “savage” ritual now took on “a polite appearance.” \(^{16}\) The hope was that an alteration in the way slaves celebrated Jonkonnu would eventually result in a transformation of their very nature. The use of white clothing as a means to impose European civility upon their colonial subjects was a common practice in the Caribbean. For example, the game of cricket was introduced to the British colonies in hopes of “civilizing” the savage natives. In cricket, the traditional all white uniform was introduced during the Victorian era as a symbol of the gentlemanly civility of the sport. The hope was that by donning their cricket whites, the colonized body would learn “the qualities of the classic British character ideal: fair play, restraint, perseverance, responsibility, and the moral inflections of Victorian Puritanism.” \(^{17}\) In the same way, by changing the look of the gombey costume, British colonizers hoped that a change of character of the enslaved people would follow.

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Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha notes that it is not uncommon for colonizers to force their own tastes and traditions onto the colonized body politic. Bhabha explains that, through the process of mimicry, the colonizers attempted to “civilize” their subjects by forcing their own traditions, rituals, or manners onto them. The colonizers hope that the adoption of “normal behaviour” will displace the behaviour that they find inappropriate or disavow. By insisting that their own rituals and practices replace those of the “uncivilized,” the colonizers intend to produce “normalized” and acceptable colonial citizens. Unfortunately for the colonizers, mimicry as Bhabha describes it does not result in an exact double, as this would negate any kind of difference between the colonizers and their subjects and therefore destabilize the necessary hierarchy. Instead, mimicry produces an ‘Other’ that is “the same, but not quite.”18 In other words, the colonized now conforms, or, in the case of Jonkonnu, literally appears to conform, to the norms of the colonizer yet does not fully mirror the colonizer. Although the performers of Jonkonnu visually resembled the English performers of Jack-in-the-Green, a distinction between the two traditions manifested itself in the subversive nature of the skits and songs that they performed.

Given the heavy British influence on the gombey tradition, it is not surprising that black Bermudians looked for a way to reinvent the gombey costume, and the early twentieth century presented them with a chance to do just that. In the 1920s and 1930s, Bermuda was beginning to blossom and shape itself into an ideal tourist destination. The economy was starting to boom and stakeholders in the tourist industry called for a reinvigoration of the island’s infrastructure. Although Bermuda was experiencing a tourism boom, the trend had not yet reached the Caribbean. In fact, some countries, like Saint Kitts, were under great economic stress, prompting a great migration to Bermuda, where Kittitians were willing to assist in the growing construction industry. These immigrants brought with them their families and traditions such as the “masquerade,” a dance inspired by black and Amerindian culture.

What is most fascinating is how the new style of gombey costume, introduced relatively recently, quickly became “accepted by the uninformed as the Bermuda article.” At a UNESCO Cultural and Conservation Conference in 1970, the gombey dance tradition

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was declared a unique local art form.\textsuperscript{19} Even more incredible is how much this transformation is glossed over by the foremost gombey experts. Louise Jackson, whose book \textit{The Bermuda Gombey: Bermuda’s Unique Dancing Heritage} is often heralded as the most important text written on the subject, acknowledges the change in costume almost in passing, spending no more than three sentences on the West Indian influence on the current look of the gombey costume.\textsuperscript{20} Similarly, Cyril Packwood exclaims, “the performance of the gombeys has changed through different periods of time. Alterations have taken place in the dances, music and costumes, but the gombeys with their drums still perform in Bermuda today – a lasting vestige of black culture!” without so much as describing how the costume has changed.\textsuperscript{21}

The lack of scholarly attention paid to this abrupt shift in costume can best be described by Roland Barthes’s theory of myth. Myth’s function, he argues, is to reassure its audience that it has always been this way, that it is indeed a fact. It makes things that would otherwise appear odd or out of place seem normal. As Barthes notes, “myth has the task of giving historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal.”\textsuperscript{22} Through its construction of a natural justification, myth is able to erase any signs of its history, of its moment of conception. Eventually, it is forgotten that the meaning placed on an object was at one point fabricated. For the gombeys, the forgetting happened quite quickly, with very few Bermudians even being aware of the original visual form of the dancers even though the costumes were in use less than eighty years ago. It is crucial that the original costume is forgotten in order for the current form to represent Bermudian identity. Forgetting is necessary for the myth to appear as if things were always that way and to “lose the memory that they were once made.”\textsuperscript{23}

In order for myth to be able to appear as if it is completely natural, it needs an object, idea, or image through which it can be naturalized.\textsuperscript{24} According to Barthes, “myth is speech stolen and restored.”\textsuperscript{25} In other words, the idea, object, or image is removed from

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\item \textsuperscript{19}“Bermuda International Gombey Festival Weekend,” Department of Community and Cultural Affairs, Government of Bermuda, accessed March 2, 2019, \url{http://www.communityandculture.bm/pages/gombey-festival}.
\item \textsuperscript{20}Louise Jackson, \textit{The Bermuda Gombey: Bermuda’s Unique Dancing Heritage} (Bermuda: L. A. Jackson, 1987), 15.
\item \textsuperscript{21}Packward, \textit{Chained on the Rock}, 96.
\item \textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 255.
\item \textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 242.
\item \textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 236.
\end{itemize}
its context, thus drained of its meaning and used in a new way. He explains the theory by stating that myth is “a second-order semiological system.”26 What was once the sign in the first system now becomes the signifier in the second. Laden with meaning in its pre-mythic state, the signifier in myth must be stripped down to only its form. In the case of the new gombey costume, Kittitian masqueraders are transported to Bermuda and any reference to Kittitians’ history and identity is removed. According to Barthes, an empty, meaningless form is needed in order for a new meaning to be inserted into it. The masquerade costume could only represent Bermudian identity once any reference to Kittitian heritage had been erased.

One prime example of the myth surrounding the new gombey costume is the alleged origin of the gombey masks. According to Jackson, the form of the gombey mask stems from West African tradition.27 However, according to oral history, the use of masks emerged from the need for enslaved people to hide from their masters. Quite often, gombey pantomime would retell stories of the horrors experienced by enslaved Bermudians. Gombeys would wear masks in an attempt to avoid punishment for exposing their masters’ harsh treatment.28 While the practice of wearing masks is not exclusively European and may in fact have West African influence, the style of masks worn by gombeys was undoubtedly European. The masks used in the original gombey costumes were meant to mimic white faces, with narrow noses, bluish eyes, and rosy cheeks. As previously mentioned, rather than referencing West African tradition, the original masks implemented by white Bermudian slave owners were meant to serve a civilizing function.

What makes the gombey mask most interesting, and simultaneously problematic, is that it is the one aspect of the contemporary costume that appears to be a holdover from the original look. A photograph from 1931 shows a Bermuda gombey donning the costume of the Kittitian masquerade (Figure 3). Although he looks downward and the photograph is in black and white, it is hard to miss the mask’s sharp angled nose and the huge circle of blush on its cheeks.

28 Zane Hendrickson (gombey captain) in discussion with the author, January 2019; Ruth Thomas (historian) in discussion with the author, January 2019.
The decision to keep the white mask is confounding if one assumes, as I assert, that the new gombey costume was adopted in order to distance the gombeys from previous European influences. Further complicating the issue is the addition of long-sleeved white shirts and white gloves to the new costumes. In Saint Kitts and Nevis, masqueraders wear shirts of various colours, and the white gloves are unique to Bermuda. Bermudian gombey troupes made what appears to be a deliberate decision to completely cover the bodies of black dancers with white fabric. Despite the shift from the gombey costume heavily influenced by Europeans to one rooted in Afro-Caribbean and Amerindian heritage, black presence still manages to be covered by white(ness). It would appear that, despite the shift in the gombey costume, black Bermudians cannot escape the spectre of their moralizing colonizers.

The presence of the white-faced mask nevertheless provides possible insight into the reasoning behind the transition from the old to the new costume. The white-faced mask can be seen as a sort of intermediary between old and new. It functions like a vestigial organ, subtly hinting at and reminding the viewer of where the initial visual form of the gombeys came from. By hinting at the origin of the old costume, the new mask now reveals or demasks its original function. “Demasking” is a term coined by Slavoj Žižek that posits that, rather than concealing identities, masks reveal ideological positions. The process of demasking is “the action of figuratively removing an ideological mask from oneself or someone else in encounters and confrontations between masked subjects and viewing

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subjects” and takes place between a viewer and wearer who hold unequal social positions. In Gerard Aching’s book on Caribbean masking tradition, *Masking and Power*, he uses the term “demasking” to argue that, in Caribbean masquerade, masks function not to conceal identities but rather to reveal them. Aching argues that the demasking process functions in two ways: it makes the viewers aware of their ideological positions, and it provides the wearers a way to “react against the way in which they have been misrecognized through a collective gaze.” It is through the confrontation of the ‘grotesque,’ comical, or jarring mask that the viewing subject is made aware of his or her ideological position. In the same way, the use of the mask makes the wearer’s presence visible. It is in this transitional period between the old and new gombey costume that the mask’s function shifts. It moves from serving as a “mask of cynical reason” used to regulate colonial bodies and impart morality to a mask used to reveal and assert identities rather than conceal them. In doing so, the white mask reveals the identities of both the viewer and the wearer. For white viewers, the mask reveals the ideological positions of whites. It reminds them of their positions as colonizers. It reveals the efforts their ancestors made to civilize the black body. The viewers must address their ideological position and assess how they reinscribe or reinforce it. On the other hand, for black wearers, the white mask provides the gombeys with a way to make their identity known. The white viewer can no longer ignore the presence of the black body because the use of the white mask against black skin reveals the previous denial of the gombeys’ agency. In making this previous injustice visible, the gombeys are able to transcend it and assert their own identities.

Thus, at the surface level, it appears that, although black Bermudians shed the costume imposed on them by their white slave owners, it was impossible to escape the mimetic and moralizing presence of the white aristocracy. However, a return to Bhabha’s theory of mimicry complicates such an analysis and yields an alternative interpretation of the issue at hand. As Bhabha explains, despite the colonizer’s attempts to reform the colonized subject, the process can only result in a partial duplication of the colonizer. In creating a civilized “Other,” colonizers must maintain a difference that denies the Other the possibility of ever becoming truly like them (and therefore their equal). A difference must remain in order to maintain the balance of power; the colonized body must always remain inferior. It is in this space of difference between colonizer and colonized that the authority of the former is threatened. It is the difference that remains, the “almost but not

32 Ibid., 6.
Black Bermudians exploited the slippage of difference and exposed the colonial practice for what it was.

The white face mask no longer contains the power it once did. It no longer conceals the identity of the black enslaved person in an attempt to “civilize.” Instead it is a symbol of black Bermudians asserting their own identity and power. The presence of whiteness in the gombey costume is no longer a sign of British attempts at reforming the other; mimicry is now exposed for its critical potential to undermine authority. Far from acting as a rejection of the blackness of the performers, their white, long-sleeved shirts wrapped in symbols of Afro-Caribbean heritage defiantly subvert the reforming practices of white masters. By replacing the original gombey costume with the costume of the masqueraders, black Bermudians were able to shed themselves of the reforming and paternal practices of their oppressors. In order to fully distance themselves from the domination of the British, Bermudians needed to adopt a new costume for their beloved gombey and believe that this current form, now mythologized as an original Bermudian tradition, simply “goes without saying.”

34 Barthes, Mythologies, 256.


Kopelson, Heather Miyano. "‘One Indian and a Negroe, the first thes Ilands ever had’: Imagining the Archive in Early Bermuda.” *Early American Studies 11*, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 272-313.


