Robert Wyndham Nicholls


The myriad Carnival, Christmas, and other masquerades of the Caribbean have been the subject of much research over the past couple of decades. With _The Jumbies’ Playing Ground_, Robert Nicholls adds to this growing scholarship by offering a detailed examination of early forms of masquerading in the Eastern Caribbean. His focus on the Leeward Islands, especially the Virgin Islands, is an important contribution, since folklorists and anthropologists have devoted somewhat less attention to performance traditions in these territories. His central thesis is that “masquerade prototypes in the Leeward Islands were formed primarily from a fusion of styles from the Upper Guinean region of West Africa—loosely defined as stretching from Senegal to the northwestern Ivory Coast—and Western Europe, especially Britain’s West Country and Scotland, Ireland, and Wales” (p. 25). He argues that peoples from these African and European regions were among the first to arrive in the post-Columbian Leewards (and Barbados) and that they established masquerade models that were then gradually modified by diverse populations.

In the late 1970s, Nicholls carried out field research on performance traditions of the Igede people of Benue State in southeastern Nigeria. This West African experience, along with wide-ranging knowledge of Western European folk traditions, guides his perspective on Leeward Island forms. His book is essentially a compilation and analysis of descriptions of Caribbean and Old World masquerades drawn from travel and plantation literature, local history publications, anthropological and folkloristic studies, and festival ephemera. It also includes material from interviews conducted with veteran masqueraders (mainly from the Virgin Islands) and numerous helpful color and halftone photographs. Through an examination of details of material style, performance, and symbolic significance on both sides of the Atlantic, Nicholls suggests possible cultural continuities, while acknowledging that “the issue of determining ancestry is fraught and loaded and in most cases is tentative at best” (p. 43). He does not attempt to provide sustained accounts of the creativity and historical development of masquerades in the context of specific social conditions of individual islands. Analysis of the performance of these masquerades at present is also outside the scope of his book, though he does note instances of their continued existence within festivals in the contemporary Caribbean.
Nicholls investigates diverse festive performance traditions in the Leeward Islands, with particular attention to bush masquerades, bull masquerades, and Mocko Jumbies. The bush masquerade, sometimes referred to as a “bear,” involves a shaggy, full-body costume made with burlap, raffia, or other vegetal material. A bull masquerader also generally wears a burlap or vegetal costume, along with a mask and a headpiece with horns. The Mocko Jumbie employs stilts and typically wears colorful trousers or a woman’s dress, a mask, and a tall hat. The bush and bull masqueraders are frequently accompanied by handlers with whips, while Mocko Jumbies themselves often carry whips. In assessing the possible roots of these traditions, Nicholls discusses bush and horned masquerades among such groups as the Upper Guinea Mandinka and Jola, as well as in the British Isles and other European locales. Meanwhile, he traces the Mocko Jumbie to various Upper Guinea peoples and suggests some Igbo influence but minimal European antecedents. Along with these investigations, he also considers such masquerades as horse figures, clowns, Mother Hubbards in St. Croix, the mummies (mummers) of St. Kitts and Nevis, and the Sensay of Dominica.

Nicholls examines this variety of Leeward Island masquerades in the context of Christmas season festivity and other special occasions in the calendar year, and describes itinerant processions, choreographies, accompanying musical instruments (such as drums and fifes), and customary exchanges of performances and gifts. He also discusses the entertainment and social control functions of masquerading in the Caribbean, West Africa, and Western Europe. Finally, he is especially intrigued by possible spiritual dimensions of masquerades and references the work of Kenneth Bilby (e.g., 2010) on deep spiritual elements within ostensibly secular Jonkonnu traditions. Old World antecedents of this religious significance include the use of masquerades in West Africa to represent or communicate with spirits in the context of such events as initiations and funerals, and European mumming traditions which are sometimes interpreted in terms of good luck.

Nicholls’s exhaustive research on masquerading in the Eastern Caribbean, West Africa, and Western Europe provides substantial evidence of transatlantic continuities and synthesis in artistic form, function, and symbolism. Given the mass of details compiled, however, the book can be a challenge to read. Paragraphs sometimes seem like lists that include instance after instance of the manifestation of a particular masquerade in diverse places and times. In addition, there is considerable repetition of information across the chapters. Nonetheless, this study greatly expands the documentary record of masquerades in the Leeward Islands and offers a wealth of material for comparison with festive traditions elsewhere in the Caribbean.
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