

Junkanoo – college essay



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Junkanoo is a Bahamian festival that occurs during the dark hours of morning on the 26th of December and again bringing in its first hours of light on the first day of the new year. Junkanoo first began as a temporary celebration of freedom for slaves who were given three days off at Christmas time. Donning scary-looking masks, slaves played homemade musical instruments and cavorted about freely on the island. The origin of the word “ Junkanoo” is unknown.

The most popular belief is that it’s derived from “ John Canoe,” an African tribal chief who demanded he be allowed the right to celebrate with his people even after he was brought to the West Indies as a slave. Others believe the name is from the French “ gens inconnus,” which means “ the unknown people” and refers to people wearing disguises and thus being unknown. Junkanoo’s roots can be traced to West Africa. In fact, other areas in the region like Bermuda and Jamaica that practised slavery had their own versions of John Canoe parades.

Junkanoo probably began in the 16th or 17th century. Around Christmas, Bahamian slaves were given a few days off. This allowed them to leave the plantations to be with their families and to celebrate the holiday with music, dance and costumes. In the early years, Junkanoo participants wore grotesque masks and walked on stilts. They were allowed to move around anonymously and let off steam. After slavery was abolished, Junkanoo almost disappeared, but a few islanders kept the tradition going. Over time, Junkanoo’s popularity has waxed and waned.

During the Junkanoo festival, thousands dance through Bay Street, Nassau's town center, like a wild ocean of colour, while deep goat skin rhythms reverberate off the surrounding walls and cow bells chatter over the singing of brass horns. The sidewalk like a snake comes to life twisting blacks and browns while balconies and roof tops sway under the rhythmic feet of onlookers. There is a timeless sense, a feeling inside that is so vital that even the deaf feel to move. And as though possessed, these God-like cardboard sculptures dive and rise to the awesome music that lifts their spirits beyond the flesh.

Music plays the most important part of Junkanoo. The rhythmic sounds of goatskin drums, cowbells and whistles accompanied by a separate brass section create an infectious beat that's too strong to resist! Besides, as Junkanoo traditions have evolved, so do the costumes. Sea sponges, leaves, fabric and shredded paper have at one time or another played their part in costume construction. Costumes today are made out of crepe paper that is meticulously glued to fabric, cardboard or wood. They usually consist of a headdress, shoulder piece and skirt, which are elaborate and brilliantly coloured.

Group members make their own costumes and it may take them up to a year to complete the intricate creations. Costume design is tied to a theme and is a carefully guarded secret. The themes vary greatly. They can be contemporary, based on the past or anything the group chooses. Junkanoo is reminiscent of New Orleans' Mardi Gras and Rio de Janeiro's Carnival. Parade participants are arranged in groups of up to 1, 000 and are organised around

a particular theme. Their costumes, dance and music reflect this theme. At the end of the Junkanoo procession, judges award cash prizes.

The three main categories for the awards are: best music, best costume and best overall group presentation. The most spectacular Junkanoo parade occurs in Nassau. However, you can also experience it on Grand Bahama, Eleuthera, Bimini and Abaco. This Bahamian festival of Junkanoo is an energetic, colourful parade of brightly costumed people gyrating and dancing to the rhythmic accompaniment of cowbells, drums and whistles. Today, it is a joyous celebration of freedom. It is an important part of the Christmas season, and The Islands Of The Bahamas is the only country where you can experience it.