

Jonkonnu in North Carolina ^[1]

Revised by Jared Dease, September 2022

In antebellum North Carolina, Christmas season was the time for a black cultural celebration found almost nowhere else in North America, but widespread through the islands of the Caribbean. Variouslly called Jonkonnu, Johnkannaus, John Coonah, or John Canoe, the custom was described in the enslaved community of Jamaica in the late eighteenth century where it was thought to have been of African origin. Although the details often changed from place to place, Jonkonnu usually involved several black men who dressed in costumes made of rags and animal skins with grotesque masks and horns. Sometimes one among them wore his best clothes instead. They danced wildly, often playing musical instruments and singing. In towns, the Jonkonnu men went from house to house while on plantations they performed at the homes of their own or other enslavers and other white people. They expected to be rewarded with gifts of money or liquor. Jonkonnu dancers were often accompanied by crowds of men and women who cheered them on while taking no direct part in the performance.

Jonkonnu obviously represented a time of release and enjoyment for enslaved people from the pain of their hard labor. Some historians believe that it may also have been a time when the constraints of the system of enslavement were loosened in other ways. On plantations in North Carolina, many different enslaved people had access to their enslavers in ways that they seldom had during the year. The Jonkonnu performers and their accompanying crowd usually came right up to their enslaver's house, something usually only allowed for enslaved people working in the house. After the performance, the enslaver(s) would often speak to the performers and shake hands with them, another departure from usual practice. Jonkonnu continued in North Carolina after emancipation, at least in Wilmington, where it was observed as late as 1880. A version of it also seems to have been appropriated by white people in the late nineteenth century. In the end, however, it may have been too closely tied to the system of enslavement in which it arose to have survived long after emancipation.

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