

Historical Background/General Information for Teachers

Junkanoo is a festival of singing, dancing, and brilliant costumes that is celebrated in The Bahamas. Junkanoo was started by African slaves in the Carolinas, Jamaica, Belize, and The Bahamas. During the 16th centuries, an African tribal chief named John Canoe insisted that the slaves be given three days off at Christmas to celebrate and preserve some of their cultural heritage. They took the opportunity to recreate some of the majesty of the Gold Coast and the Congo in a festival. When slavery was abolished, the Junkanoo festivals died in all areas except The Bahamas, where it has become a national festival. Today, Junkanoo is a happy celebration of freedom.

The fancy costumes are the focus of the festival. Groups of people design and create beautiful costumes out of brightly colored paper, feathers, and narrow strips of crepe paper. The costumes are highlighted by large headdresses. Some costumes are as large as 7 to 12 feet tall and wide. It can get pretty heavy to support such a large costume the whole length of the parade.

Different troupes, such as the Saxons, Valley Boys, Roots, Fancy Dancers, Z-Bandits, and the PIGS, start early in the year designing their costumes for Junkanoo. Each troupe chooses a theme and makes their costumes using variations on that theme. Groups work secretly in "hide-outs" to protect their ideas. Leadership and teamwork develops within each group as they design and create award-winning images. Floats as big as ten feet across and high are constructed from cardboard, light pieces of wood and various pieces of "junk," like packaging materials.

Junkanoo starts in the early morning hours of December 26. At about 4:00 A.M. on December 26, the loud goat-skin drums, cow bells, whistles, and other traditional instruments wake the residents and call them out to view the lively parades. A second parade starts early on New Year's Day.

Monetary awards are given to presentations that are "Most Artistically Designed," "Most Colorful," and "Best Overall Presentation" (the most coveted). When the festival first started hundreds of years ago, costumes were made of twigs and leaves. Now the troupes spend thousands of dollars on their costumes and floats. Local banks and businesses donate money to help the troupes offset their costs. The troupes also compete to see who can bring out the most people and make the most noise.

Many of the troupes have missions beyond participating in the parades of Junkanoo. One troupe, called "One Family," has a summer camp for kids. They also get involved with local issues in order to help their country preserve its heritage and support the people whatever their needs.

After the judging results are announced at 9 A.M., people relax with conch, beans and peas, johnny-cake, and other Bahamian Favorites.

