

‘Th’Owd Pagan Dance’: Ritual, Enchantment, and an Enduring Intellectual Paradigm

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In writings that have been untouched by twentieth century anthropology, the interpretation of dances and dancing as ‘ritual’ has long provided misapprehensions about the status of dancing as the most ancient of artistic activities. Indeed, dances performed as ‘calendar traditions’ in modern Europe have frequently been held up as Tylorian “cultural survivals” which are thought to provide evidence of earlier stages of human development. Often tied to a pre-industrial calendar, these customary enactments of particular dances at a specific point in the year are construed as pre-modern relics of former pagan rituals.

This interpretation of the dance as ritual emerges quite specifically from traditions of European thought during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It has been soundly criticised by anthropologists of dance and human movement in the last third of the twentieth century (e.g., Keali’inohomoku 1970, 1976; Williams 1974; Youngerman 1974; Royce 1977: 19-21; Hanna 1979: 50-54). Williams (1991: chapters 4 and 5), in particular, provides a sustained critique of such perspectives in which she traces the pervading influence of Comtean positivism. Nonetheless, the belief that dance and ritual practices share primitive origins retains currency within a number of pseudo-academic and populist contexts. Contemporary fieldworkers intent on discovering local modes of explanation for a particular dance custom may often meet the regurgitation of these older ideas circulating within an ethnographic community. The dissemination and repetition of these now discredited academic modes of explanation for dances and dancing thus become part of the ethnographic investigation.

Recent attention to reflexivity in the social sciences has engendered some critical scrutiny of the impact of a fieldworker’s publications upon the community being studied, principally in relation to the politics of representation (see, for example, Brettell 1993 and Hüwelmeier 2000). Less attention has been paid, however, to detailed examinations of how, by whom, and in what forms and contexts, such written materials are employed within the community itself. In part, this reflects the concentration on oral cultures and synchronic framework of analysis typical of mid-twentieth century anthropology. More recent anthropological endeavours, however, have begun to address historical dimensions in a more frequent and systematic manner. This is partly in recognition of colonialist inequalities, as well as the emergence of doing ‘anthropology at home’, which includes research in societies with long traditions of written expression. As a result, the ‘anthropologist at home’ may now need to take on board literary exposition, a domain that has traditionally belonged to historians, critics, folklorists and literary scholars.

Limon (1991), in his study of the effects of “precursory ethnography” on his own fieldwork on polka in Mexico has discussed the legacy of interpretations from previous fieldworkers. McDonald (1987) has vividly portrayed the complexities of conducting fieldwork in Brittany, where the academic community and the people being studied hold alternative interpretations of the latter’s ethnic identity. In folklore studies, Pattison (1977) has provided a critical study of how nineteenth

century evolutionary theory has had an impact upon the performers and performance of an English folk play. Similarly, Boyes' (1987-88) examination of the continuing fascination with the "doctrine of survivals" in the interpretation of British calendar customs, makes reference to how members of an ethnographic community have related to visiting folklorists and their interpretations. To date, however, few investigators have examined the reasons why those involved continue to articulate and circulate exegeses of dances as ritual practices, both locally and more broadly. In this paper, I propose to examine one European calendar dance tradition with these questions in mind.

The Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers (often referred to locally as the 'Nutters') have performed an annual danced ceremony in Bacup in the Rossendale Valley, Northwest England, from at least the mid-nineteenth century and possibly earlier. It became clear to me during archival searches and fieldwork carried out in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that for twentieth-century writers about this dance and its performers, placing a date on the custom's *origin* — real or supposed — constituted an important focus for differing interpretations. This strategy involved constructing the 'meaning' of the dance in terms of its past. This paper will examine the circumstances of production of these exegeses, in which different historical narratives are perceived to articulate the dance's 'meaning'. I will also consider how these different texts (in the Barthesian sense), whether spoken or written, are used in a piecemeal manner by writers and performers alike to authenticate the dance tradition outside its immediate community of enactment. Indeed, for some of the performers such texts provide a ready made answer to inquiries from outsiders beyond the formulaic "it's just a tradition." I draw upon methodological resources from literary analysis, history and folklore studies to examine this intertextual practice of assigning meaning to the dance.

The term 'intertextuality' was coined by Kristeva in the late 1960s who drew on the earlier work of Bakhtin (see Worton and Still 1990: 1-44). It is now employed across a diverse range of disciplines.¹ In this paper, it is the situated dialogic aspects of texts as signifying practices that I wish to highlight. As Barthes expounds:

... any text is an intertext, other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognisable forms: the texts of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations Intertextuality, the condition of any text whatsoever, cannot, of course, be reduced to a problem of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks (Barthes 1981: 39).

Whilst this is ultimately the case, I propose to examine the dynamics of contextualised intertextuality which reveal the influences and intellectual legacies contributing to the assignment of meanings in a process of tradition making. As we shall see, the statements made by various agents about the meaning of Coco-Nut dancing are an important factor in the articulation and maintenance of cultural survivals theory in relation to this dance custom.

For the purposes of this paper, I will confine my discussion to explanatory narratives and statements regarding origins. Although the performers and their local communities hold additional participatory rationales, the examination of which would lead to a fuller anthropological understanding, they are more properly

the subject of a further paper. My focus on origins reflects the dialectics of the discourse (in a Foucauldian sense) within which the practice of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers has ostensibly become located. I present a particularised diachronic and synchronic study of how a ritual dance form becomes entangled with a specific intellectual paradigm. Subsequent intertextualised articulations of national and local expositions contribute to the creation and maintenance of social prestige and perceived cultural superiority — for performers, their local audience, and cultural brokers alike.

Coco-Nut Dancing

The Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers are a group of eight adult male dancers who dance through the streets of the town of Bacup in northwest England every Easter Saturday. A small musical band playing silver wind instruments and another dancer, the 'Whipper-In' (who carries a long whip), accompany them. The "coconuts" are, in fact, polished circular pieces of wood, which are attached with leather straps singly above each knee and on the palms of the hands, with a slightly larger one to the left side of the waist. The dancers also carry garlands, which are half hoops of flexible cane decorated with bands of red, white and blue crêpe paper. The men are dressed in clogs (wooden-soled footwear with leather uppers), long white socks, black velvet knee breeches, and a long-sleeved black woollen sweater, over which is worn a short white kilt decorated with horizontal red stripes at its base. This latter garment has attached to it a broad white band, which runs diagonally over one shoulder. Every dancer has a blackened face and wears a white hat decorated with pom-poms, braid and a feather.

The custom of Coco-Nut Dancing, as practised in the Rossendale Valley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, received little attention in local contemporaneous literature. The fact that the dancers appeared in the streets is merely noted in newspaper reports of local activities over the Easter holiday (see Buckland 1990: 3-4). There is no hint of explanation or attempts to interpret the custom, either in terms of its history or potential ritual significance. Even when the Tunstead Mill Nutters, predecessors of the Britannia team, celebrated their fifty-year jubilee in 1907, local press reporters evidently saw no need to explain the practice (see Buckland 1986). Significantly, the first recorded written account that offers an interpretation of the custom is not in a local paper but from the *Belfast Newsletter* in 1910. In this report, reference is made to the bringing of luck by the dancers to the local residents. This is a somewhat isolated reading of the custom, however.² Oral testimony relating to this period before the First World War (which brought an end to the Tunstead Mill Nutters) reveals local interpretations that relate principally to street entertainment rather than ritual significance (Buckland 1986: 143-144). This interpretation changed, however, when the existence of Coco-Nut Dancing came to the attention of London-based folk dance researchers from the English Folk Dance Society (EFDS), after being revived in the hamlet of Britannia on the southern outskirts of Bacup during the early 1920s.³ This arrival of metropolitan interest assisted in promoting the continued performance of the Easter custom in Bacup to the present day.

Initial contact with the EFDS (hereafter, the Society) occurred when folk revivalist Maud Karpeles first sought to collect the repertoire from the Britannia

team of Coco-Nut Dancers at the end of the 1920s (see Note 3). Her field notes dated 11 May 1929 are typical of a revivalist folk dancer during this period.⁴ They contain written descriptions and floor plans of the dances, detail on costume and accoutrements, and slender contextual information. She does not record any interpretation from the dancer she interviewed. Unfortunately, no scholarly article emerged from Karpeles' contact with the tradition of Coco-Nut Dancing. This is not altogether surprising since the Society had no programme for academic publications. An additional factor, however, was that Karpeles, along with others in the Society, was of the belief that Cecil Sharp, their principal collector and scholar, had already recorded the most significant dances of English folk tradition prior to his death in 1924, and that aside from scattered examples, there was really nothing left to be discovered. It is also interesting to note that the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers themselves had clearly been worried by the Society's interest in their tradition and had sought to veto any publication or dissemination through a legal agreement. This agreement survives only in draft form but evidently was adhered to by both parties throughout most of the twentieth century (Buckland 2001a).

Cecil Sharp and the Concept of Folk

In 1931, the Society invited the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers to perform in its annual showcase of English folk dance at the Royal Albert Hall in London. The Society's understanding of the term 'folk' was almost exclusively derived from the work of Cecil Sharp. As the Society's leading founder with extensive dance collections and publications to his credit, Sharp determined which dance forms should be accepted into the canon of English folk and how they should be interpreted and understood, both in performance and in scholarly terms. In order to appreciate the impact that Sharp's pronouncements later exercised on the Britannia Coco-nut Dancers, his theoretical observations on customary English dance ceremonies as "folk practices" require some expansion.

The concept of 'folk' owes most to interpretations of the work of the eighteenth-century German theologian and philosopher, Johann Herder. Herder's championship of the European peasantry as repositories of natural expression and true national spirit spurred the development of folklore study throughout the next century (see Bendix 1997: 34-44). The notion of 'folk' is predicated on a binary relationship between the world of the collector and that of the informant or 'tradition bearer' from whom the material is collected. For an activity to be labelled as genuine in its 'folkness', a template of 'otherness' was employed, which can be schematised as follows:

| <u>Collector</u> | <u>Tradition Bearer</u> |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Urban | Rural |
| Middle/Upper Society | Lower Society |
| Educated | Uneducated |
| Literate | Illiterate |
| Young | Old |
| Articulate | Inarticulate |
| Unrooted | Rooted |
| No traditions | Many traditions |
| Sophisticated | Naïve |
| Reflective | Unreflective |

Collector's World

Present
 Cosmopolitan
 Ethnically diverse
 Increasingly secular
 Individualised
 Known history

Tradition Bearer's World

Past
 Indigenous
 Ethnically pure
 Religious, even pagan
 Communal
 Beyond history

It is important to realise that these sets of oppositions are perceptions and not necessarily actualities, historical or otherwise. The work of nineteenth-century British cultural anthropologist E.B. Tylor came to be of especial relevance to Sharp as part of this worldview. Tylor's "doctrine of survivals," set out in *Primitive Culture* (1871), identified seemingly irrational cultural practices amongst the peasantry as lingering remains of primitive religion. It was left to James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890) to popularise such thinking. Unfortunately, it continued to exercise a compelling power, particularly in the arts and humanities, long after anthropology as a professional discipline had rejected such interpretations.⁵ Indeed, the myth of 'the folk' and the supposed primitive religious origins of the dance itself were classified as a "cultural survival" in the publications and teaching of the Society until at least the 1960s, and may still be found in the publicity distributed by present day revivalist dancers.

Sharp broadly classified all dances into two basic types: ceremonial and social. The former category, including Morris and Sword Dances, had a special significance in tracing the development of a dance. In his posthumously published *The Dance: An Historical Survey of Dancing in Europe*, Sharp's nationalist and evolutionist framework is clear:

All the nations of Europe have their own distinctive forms of folk-dance, some in a purer form than others The earliest forms of folk-dance bear upon them unmistakable signs of a religious origin; indeed, some of them are still performed ritually, as pagan ceremonies of a quasi-religious or magic character, usually associated with the cultivation and fertility of the soil, and performed at particular seasons of the year (Sharp and Oppé 1924: 4-5).

Until the 1960s and 1970s, Sharp's iconoclastic status was such that in order to enter the canon as a genuine survival of religious antiquity, the pedigree of any new discovery by the Society was vetted against his criteria (Sharp 1909: 10-12). To achieve entry, the dance practice needed to display precise characteristics with regard to time of performance, location, gender of performers, mode of transmission and dress. Thus an "authentic" ritual dance (or dance ritual) would be executed at a specific point in the calendar in the home locality by men whose knowledge of the dance was restricted to them and who were dressed in attire other than everyday clothes. Any deviation was construed as evidence of modernity and hence degeneration.

Sharp's first attempt in 1907 to interpret Morris Dances did not draw upon concepts of ritual, however. Instead, he contextualised such dances using the received scholarly opinion of nineteenth century literary and popular antiquarians (Sharp 1909: 13-15). Many of them promulgated the view that Morris Dancing had its origins in Morocco, pointing to linguistic similarities between earlier accounts of Morisco Dancing and to records of black faces.⁶ In the second edition of *The Morris*

Book however, Sharp pronounced that the “ ... highest authorities reject the Moorish hypothesis, and see in the Morris the survival of some primitive religious ceremonial” (1912: 11).

Clearly, Sharp had fallen under the spell of Tylorian theory as applied to dance, ritual and drama, drawn principally from the writings of mediaevalist and drama scholar, E. K. Chambers (1903). In the introduction to the second edition of *The Morris Book*, together with the more detailed version laid out in his earlier text, *The Sword Dances of Northern England* (1911), Sharp unequivocally located the origin of Morris dances in primitive fertility rites. The black face, formerly a sign of Moorishness, was re-interpreted as a form of disguise to protect the ritual actor from identification. It is only because of a perceived relationship, Sharp explains, rather than any actual historical origin, that any connection between the words ‘Morris’ and ‘Moorish’ can be made. He supports his assertion with a citation from Chambers’ *The Mediaeval Stage*: “ ... the faces were not blackened because the dancers represented Moors, but rather the dancers were thought to represent Moors because their faces were blackened.” (Sharp 1911, part 1: 36). This explanation of the black face as ritual disguise rather than a representation of a person of African ancestry is of particular relevance in contemporary interpretations of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers, as will be demonstrated below.

On the basis of gender, locality, time of performance and special dress, the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers easily met the criteria Sharp had established for authenticity. Yet there were question marks hanging over the age and provenance of the custom when they first attracted Karpeles’ attention (see Buckland 1990: 2-3). As my investigation into other instances of Coco-Nut Dancing has revealed, the tradition in Bacup possibly had its origins in nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy rather than “primitive” (i.e., pagan) ritual. An examination of the Society’s written interpretations shows that this suspicion occasionally haunted members, but was cast aside in favour of the dominant cultural survivals theory.

English Folk Dance Society Interpretations of the Coco-Nut Dancers

Foremost amongst the interpreters of this dance tradition was Douglas Kennedy who, as director of the Society, was effectively responsible for enhancing their profile in a national rather than local context. This required him to act as a scholarly authority on the custom’s significance, particularly to an audience unfamiliar with the practice. When the dancers first appeared before a largely metropolitan, educated and middle class London audience in 1931, his review of their performance was openly speculative and circumspect. He states, “Here was ample scope for the folklorists. Were the dances original, or a modern adaptation? What is the significance of the coconuts and garlands? Is there any connection between them and swords and sticks? The answers must be left to the individual taste” (Kennedy 1931: 1). He went on to draw parallels with European ritual dances which featured swords and sticks.

Given the dancers’ striking appearance, however, it is not surprising that national press coverage in 1932 sought correspondences much further afield. The *Daily News and Chronicle* (2nd January, 1932) wrote, “Eight dancers with blackened faces and costumed to look more like Hottentots than Lancashire lads danced

cleverly to the music of a concertina and kept up elaborate rhythmic variations by clapping the coconut on their hands, knees and faces." For this reporter, the unusual nature of the performance is paramount, with its complex rhythmic execution and apparent exotic links. Although there is no suggestion of an *origin* in Africa, this reporter does relate the black faces and costume to the Khoikhoi peoples of South Africa who had been given the name 'Hottentots' by Europeans.⁷ Such references occur elsewhere in outsiders' interpretations of the dances. When the troupe recommenced their Easter street dance in 1948, after the Second World War, an on-location reporter from Radio Newsreel set the scene for listeners with the following mixture of orientalism and primitivism: "I feel that I should say that I am talking to you from just about somewhere east of Suez because there's quite an oriental atmosphere here ... It certainly doesn't look like Old England" (Dixon 1948).

Such exoticization of the dances can also be found in Society publicity material.⁸ By the 1950s, the Society had firmly established the credentials of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers as an example of English ceremonial dance and as a folk dance idiom of national significance that was all the more remarkable for its curiosity appeal.

As early as 1938, despite obvious similarities with blackface theatre traditions, Kennedy had settled upon an interpretation of the dancing which placed it firmly beyond the nineteenth century and within the mould of an indigenous cultural survival of a pagan ritual.⁹ The Albert Hall programme notes for that year describe the dancers thus: "This dance is [also] a surviving medicine dance and the black faces entitle the dance to rank as a true Morisco. A coconut dance very similar in character has recently been discovered in Bavaria" (*Royal Albert Hall programme*, 8 January 1938).

The comparison with a Bavarian dance situates Coco-Nut Dancing once again in a wider European framework. However, true to Sharp, Kennedy finds one point of origin for *all* the calendrical dances that appeared at the concert. He attributes to each one significance as a "native magical dance or Medicine Men's dance, the purpose of which was to get rid of spent forces and renew life by vital action." Kennedy also makes an association with "old mid-Winter and Spring festivals," tying the Coco-Nut and garland dancing tradition of the Rossendale Valley into an ancient agricultural ritual. The black face has now become *the* emblem of authenticity. Any suggestion of African origins is absent in this interpretation. Instead, Kennedy draws upon Sharp's use of Chambers to accord the dancers higher status as ancient ritual actors.

Later that year, Arthur Bracewell, the leader of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers, asked Kennedy to authenticate their dance as a genuine Morris Dance. Judging from Kennedy's response to Bracewell, there were clear differences between local and national criteria of what constituted 'authenticity' in Morris Dancing. Kennedy's letter is worth quoting in full for its imaginative application of cultural survivals theory to a practice, which, in fact, owed much to English theatrical dance traditions of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

I hear that there is some doubt as to the traditional nature of the Bacup Coconut Morris Dance and that there is a disposition in some quarters to regard it as not being a Morris Dance at all.

I can only say that the evidence is all the other way round. Our knowledge of these old dances is of course very limited and one can't be dogmatic and lay down the law. Your dance has no counter-part in any other part of England and the only dance that I have heard of which is at all like it is one which is reported from Bavaria and which is known to be an extremely ancient local custom.

We use the term "Morris Dance" in a very general way and apply it to those dances which were originally magic in intention and which were performed just on certain occasions in the year on certain feast days. The essence of the dance lies in its performance by a group of young men who should be disguised either with masks or paint and who represent by their dance either the driving out of death or the bringing in of life. One of the features of your dance which has always interested me is the character who carries the whip, for this whip is frequently found in connection with the Morris dance and emphasises the driving out or scapegoat idea which is so prevalent among these dances. The inclusion of the dancer with the whip is sufficient evidence to show that your dance is one of the authentic Morris dances surviving in Europe (Kennedy 1938).

There are indeed parallels with elements of European pageantry and street processions (see examples in Burke 1978; Corrsin 1997; Forrest 1999) but it was not Kennedy's intention to suggest the likelihood that the dance is a nineteenth century *bricolage* of older cultural traits with more recent popular entertainment forms. At this point, the needs of both performers and cultural broker were driven towards the same assertion of *authenticity*. This worked to the advantage of both, even though the social contexts of their understanding — the local competition and the national folk heritage — were different.

During my fieldwork I found that Kennedy's letter had made an impact upon the Britannia dancers themselves. Older dancers had memories of Kennedy's act of legitimisation in the letter, and aspects of its content are to be found in later expositions of the dance's origin by the dancers and some of their immediate community.

Patronised by the Society for much of the twentieth century, the dancers found themselves in new performance contexts, leading to media coverage by the local and national press, regional and national magazines, books on tourism and traditions, radio, television and occasional performances outside Britain in international folk festivals. Kennedy's interpretation, accepted as the 'official' meaning, often travelled to these new audiences, confirming the black-faced Coconut dancer as a disguised ritual actor from the Stone Age. The garlands and coconuts were cast as direct evidence of ancient ritual origins, the former demonstrating "a connection with the renewal of vegetation," the latter compared with the bells worn by Morris dancers which assist in "dispense[ing] the Medicine implicit in all these Spring rituals." (*Royal Albert Hall Programme*, 6-8 January 1949). The ritual regalia, according to Kennedy, provide real clues to the indigenous antiquity and possible *universal origin* of the custom. Situated beyond time and geography in this way, the dancers' actions are transformed from local street entertainment to miraculous ritual survival. As Kennedy puts it " ... [the] weird use of the wooden discs to tap out rhythms, and the manner in which the dancers listen to these taps as if they were signals, impart a sense of magic and mystery" (*ibid.*; cf. Froome 1953).

The Coco-Nut Dancers' Written Explanations

Among the local dancers, however, alternative articulations of the custom's origin are to be found. In 1948, the Society published details from a letter sent by Bracewell in response to a request for information (Bracewell 1948). Bracewell posits a historical continuity from the mediaeval period, coupling Coco-Nut dancing and Rush bearing.¹¹ He suggests the mid-eighteenth century at least, for the dance's existence in the particular locality. Bracewell duly rehearses Kennedy's argument about the one-time use of the whip to drive away devils. No source materials are cited to support any of his statements, but the significant new detail that emerges from his account shifts the geographical provenance of the tradition substantially. Coco-Nut Dancing in Bracewell's narrative is exoticised as the dance of sailors and pirates and therefore as *not English in its origin*. The dress and black faces lead him to call the custom's progenitor "a black pirate dance of mad revelry." Bracewell seems quite attached to this somewhat literary phrase as he repeated it in a radio interview in the same year. It sits oddly with the Rossendalian vernacular, and hardly accords with an accurate description of the custom since there is little of the anarchic or truly bacchanalian in its practice to justify the use of such a phrase. Additional information on the team's history was published locally in 1954 in a poem written on the retirement of two dancers from the team. Clifford Heyworth, a Lancashire dialect writer from Britannia, composed the twenty-stanza poem using historical details furnished by the team's treasurer.

It coom first of all, well, so Aw've bin tow'd
When th'ow'd Cornish miners invaded eaw'r fow'd,
Areawnd Wit'orth valley an o'er Tunstead way
'Til 1907 show a Jubilee Day. (Heyworth 1954)

It came first of all, well, so I've been told
When the old Cornish miners invaded our fold [valley]
In the area around Whitworth valley and over Tunstead way
Until 1907 when it was [the dancers'] Jubilee Day.

Exposed to larger, new audiences in the post-War period, the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers frequently found themselves the subject of direct inquiry. In response, the then secretary John Flynn, prepared a circular letter in 1958, a copy of which I received when he replied to my own initial request for information in 1978. Starting and ending on the cautious note that "this information is in no way authoritative and quite open to doubt," the letter relates local oral testimony on the custom's origin. According to this narrative, Moorish pirates settled in Cornwall to work in the tin mines. When new mines opened in Lancashire during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Cornishmen re-located to work there. The circular identifies two Cornishmen who came to work at Whitworth Quarry, bringing the dance with them. This latter detail is given as being "well known" at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries according to a "recently retired dancer" (this may well have been Bracewell). The dress and black faces are thus again attributed to the appearance of Moorish pirates. A further connection with mining is made through the pieces of wood, which are dismissed as "coconuts" but explained as possible forms of protection for the hands and knees of miners, with the waist 'nut' as a spare.

The story undoubtedly has a veneer of logic in relation to English social history, which renders it plausible. My attempts, however, to corroborate this narrative have proved fruitless, aside from detail relating to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when there were other local teams (see Buckland 1986 and 1990). In its favour, there were, indeed, tin mines in Cornwall and quarries in Whitworth. Census returns in 1871 also reveal Cornish settlers. So far, however, no evidence has come forth of sailors from North Africa living in Cornwall. The census returns, which prior to 1871 record only country, not an individual's county of origin, do not shed light on any potential Cornishmen who might have transmitted the dance before the Tunstead Mill dancers' reputed start date of 1857. Hence, even with local information, the origins and history remain mysterious. But it is this very mystery, which becomes a vital ingredient in both local and national representations, whether the custom is perceived as originating beyond England or beyond recorded time.

In addition to this circular outlining the Cornish miners' legend, I was also sent another typescript with the heading "The Bacup Coconut Dance." My later perusal of John Flynn's archive revealed that it was copied directly from the back of an undated calendar which depicted the Coco-Nut Dancers "in Tudor times." The unknown author drew on cultural survivals theory in general, asserting the primitive origins of dance, together with the Moorish origin theory for Morris Dancing. Aside from factual inaccuracies regarding the dancers' appearance, the text makes reference to a similar dance in Provence, France (possibly a detail from Alford's *Introduction to English Folk-Lore*) and concludes that the Coco-Nut dance is "a pre-industrial survival." It contains none of the caution with which John Flynn's circular letter opens and concludes. In an interview in 1978, John Flynn was wary of such speculation saying, "I wouldn't like to give an interpretation on the dance: it's just a dance" (recorded interview, 8 March, 1978).¹²

The Coco-Nut Dancers' Spoken Explanations

Taking the custom at such face value, however, does not satisfy curious onlookers, as my fieldwork during the 1970s and 1980s was to underline. At Easter and at other performance events the dancers were frequently asked by onlookers to explain where the dance came from. On Good Friday 1979, dancer Paul Cronkshaw (who joined the dancers in 1975) put it as follows, "Oh, everybody asks you — everybody you see asks you ... I know tomorrow I'll get asked a million times what it is ... and what we do ... and what are we supposed to be." As this statement indicates, the need to provide 'origin stories' occupied a significant part of the performers' relations with their visiting audience and thus required ethnographic investigation on my part. My own questions were not intended to uncover a 'real' history from the actual 'tradition bearers' but to map how each dancer responded to such inquiry and to evaluate the significance the dancers themselves accorded these origin narratives.

Attendance at practice nights quickly revealed that there was no specific instruction or, indeed, much attention paid to the team's history or to how to answer queries on the team's origins. As a new recruit in 1979, Ken Wadsworth's experience was typical. He said, "I've never asked, to be honest. Little bits of things, you now, like how long they've been going and I don't really think they seem to know. They say. 'Oh, so far back we can remember to, but possibly before then.'"

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, new dancers tended to acquire their understanding of the team's origins piecemeal, mostly from leader John Flynn, and secretary Brian Daley. This practice was not necessarily particular to this time period, however, as the following testimonies from Frank Simpson (joined 1959) and Alan Edwards (joined 1970) suggest:

Whatever I know I've got from listening to John Flynn and Brian Daley. I've never been concerned with that [stories about the history]. We all take it for granted that Brian romances a bit with his stories. Sometimes we've been baffled ourselves when we go to these folk festivals and they announce us and we don't know what they're talking about. They read things and we don't know what the hell they're on about. That's the most common view about the Cornish miners — no, I've no story I prefer about the Nutters. I've always been content to take it as it is — except when you get in a strange country of course, not round here, where people come up to you and want to know the history of it (22 February 1979).

No I don't know anything about the origins of it, only what I've picked up from the lads. There's various tales about the Moors and the Cornish. Well, John [Flynn] said the EFDSS had researched into it and they could only go back 150 years (18 January 1979).

Frank Simpson's characterisation of the "Cornish miners" narrative as the most prevalent was undoubtedly true amongst past and present dancers:

Well, as I've heard the dance is from pirates in Cornwall and they taught it to people in the tin mines. When the tin mines closed down they came up to work in the Lancashire quarries from Cornwall (Dick Shufflebotham, 24 April 1979).

Mind, I think it was brought into the Valley. That Cornish miners' tale — I think there was some truth in that. The Cornish were a hard-bitten lot — they must have been to work in the tin mines. I think they brought it up here, earn their beer money, that's what it was for (Walter Perry, 18 January 1979).

Brian Daley (member 1958-1990), who told me that he collected "anything to do with the Nutters," provided an interesting gloss on the Cornish connection:

Well, you know when we cup our hands behind our ears like this, well they tell us these experts that it's to do with the Cornish women in the eighteenth century listening for the press gangs coming to take their husbands away and that there's a similar movement in Cornish dances. But we say well there weren't no press gangs with the Moors (11 July 1979).

Verification of the Cornish details that he relates, or identification of the source of the "experts" has not been possible. What is more significant about this testimony is not only the creative use of locally and nationally derived narratives of origin but his implied preferred interpretation of a Moorish origin, which serves to exoticize the custom through an 'othering' of time and space (i.e., opposed to and distanced from the speaker's personal geographical and historical position). There is an appeal to historical verisimilitude in the argument that press gangs are a feature of English not Moorish social history, but of course, this elides the point that a proven connection with the Moors remains to be made. Brian Daley was not alone in presenting this version of the origin narrative. An older dancer, Leslie Pilling, (1934-1955) embellishes the narrative even further with the detail of slavery, based on an interpretation of the whip: "It's a Moroccan slave dance actually ... brought over

here to Cornwall if I remember right, then it moved up the country and it got to Shawforth ... and eventually it gets to Britannia" (30 March 1978).

A dancer of the same vintage, Frank Ashworth (1931-1939, re-joined 1956) offered a related interpretation: "The tale were like — years and years and years ago they caught these slaves you know ... they used to have a dance but it weren't anything like that — but they used to say that's where it came from, from a foreign country — but they were slaves — that's why we have a whip at the front" (17 July 1979).

In Dick Shufflebotham's (joined 1956) account of the presence of black face, ethnic origin has been replaced by the Society's interpretation that it is a disguise. He combines this with Bracewell's tale of transmission by pirates: "But it is a pirate's dance. Well, they black their faces, you see, as a disguise so the pirates couldn't be seen in the night" (24 April 1979).

This interpretation of the black face as a disguise is given considerable credence by the dancers, not necessarily in relation to the dance's origin, but as an experienced reality. Furthermore, there are numerous tales of the dancers not being recognised by close neighbours and even by kin when "blackened up."¹³ In the context of origin narratives, however, the black face is frequently attributed to an African source. When people from outside the Valley with reputed direct experience of African dance practices make such a connection, it carries particular authority:

Once we were at the Eisteddfod and we were just about to dance, the evening concert it was, and there was this real dapper dressed fellow ... he was the culture writer for some New York paper. He said that he'd just got back from South Africa and he'd seen a dance just like ours with the nuts by this tribe in some way out place in South Africa. But then we had to go on and dance and we didn't get to find out anymore (Brian Daley, 11 July 1979).

You know, I'd like to find out where it did come from. Like we danced at one place down Waterfoot and there were, I think it were an African chap, it were ... and he said then he'd seen a dance from a tribe near from where he came from, exactly the same, except they don't use nuts, so ... put together then a story that when the slaving ships came they took some people from that village, fetched them back through America and landed them at Cornwall and they used to do dances then in their village and the pirates have picked it up off them or whatever and then it's gone from that. Nobody knows where [the] black faces come from or the costumes nor nothing really. I can't imagine a tribe in Africa wearing red and white kilts and clogs (Paul Cronkshaw, Good Friday, 1979).

The detour "through America" in Paul Cronkshaw's testimony is perhaps an individualised detail that derives from his general knowledge of the transatlantic slave trade. On occasion, however, dancers would provide a more specific connection between Africa and England through speculative references to the Boer War. Indeed, one dancer revised his earlier opinion of the custom's origin as ancient, insisting instead that it was no doubt a recent innovation inspired through witnessing a similar dance during the Boer War (see Buckland 1999: 204-205).

Projected South African connections were also referred to by Tom Ellison and David Smith (10 July, 1978) who said that there was talk amongst older dancers (unspecified) of connection between the locally based Kimberley working men's club, so-called after its namesake in South Africa, and the tradition of Coco-Nut

Dancing. Indeed, a number of folk revivalist dancers have drawn my attention to their own perceived correlation between the Britannia CocoNutters and the South African gumboot dances performed by miners (see Tracey 1952). This speculation appears to derive its rationale from black faces, adult men, percussive sounds made by the hands on the body, and possibly the knowledge that miners in the locality once performed the Coco-Nut Dance. This piece of information is supplied in the local aetiological legend and perhaps accords with outsiders' knowledge, real or supposed, that some of the previous dancers in the Valley were miners by occupation. Any further correspondence, however, does not go beyond these superficialities. Clearly, in the circulating rationales for the phenomenon — which is now constructed as alien in origin — such ascribed connections between Africa and the local tradition further add to the mystery.

In responding to my queries, individual dancers occasionally called upon textual authorities to support or extend what they perceived as their own incomplete knowledge. Of particular note is an account by a local librarian in a collection of writings entitled *A Bacup Miscellany* (Bowden 1972) which synthesizes the local legend with programme notes from the Albert Hall. It had certainly supplemented Ken Wadsworth's understanding of the tradition some five months after joining the team. Indeed, inclusion of the detail that it was a "fertility dance" (obviously drawn from the Society's writings) was corroborated for Ken when Brian Daley introduced a performance as " ... some kind of fertility dance which had possibly been brought up from the Cornish mining area" (Ken Wadsworth, 29 March 1979). Reflected in the following response from Paul Cronkshaw is uncertainty about his own knowledge, plus a desire to help me by referring to the authority of books written by outside experts on folklore.

Well, it's whipping evil spirits away ... I had a book up there one time but I've lent it out and I've never seen it since — 'That's English Folklore' ... it's got the Nutters in it and it's a good piece on them ... All I keep hearing about is it came from Cornwall, Moorish pirates and that but you hear that many tales people telling you where it came from that I don't bother. I just tell them oh it's an old Cornish dance from a coal miner and that's it, that's all I know. It's just what I've heard people telling — you know — Nutters telling people. Nobody knows, they can't trace it, even the folk festival [people] can't trace it back for us. It might have been here all the time in Rossendale but nobody knows (17 April 1981).

Reflecting on the improbability of this interpretation, plus the fact that the Cornish are not noted for wearing clogs, and miners do not wear such a costume, Paul Cronkshaw concluded:

So I don't think anybody knows, it's just stories they're making up. I think it were an old ... [pauses to reflect] myself, I think it's an old dance troupe and they've had that uniform all time in Lancashire and people's been adding bits and bits on to say where it did come from but I think it's always been in Lancashire. But nobody knows ... I wish I could try and find an old book or summat or an old picture what said what it were — originated from Lancashire — the Britannia Coconutters ... like I say I am interested but not really struck with this comes from Cornwall and all this — it just seems ... I think it's been here all time, it comes from here (17th April 1981).

This interpretation accords with that of John Flynn (1946-1983) who remained staunchly unimpressed by the notion of exotic origins:

I've had students and that coming and interviewing and some of them's gone to Cornwall, you know, and I've said to them if you ever get in Cornwall and make some research there just, you know. ... But nobody's ever come up with anything. ... To myself, I think it's just word of mouth off somebody because all the history and talk of it has come from in the Valley, you know, Bacup and Rawtenstall (17 March, 1978).

Brian Daley's more elaborate explanations of the dance clearly drew on his large collection of programme notes, newspaper clippings, articles, audio and videotapes, photographs, posters and other ephemera. Other team members with such archive material included John Flynn and Derek Pilling, both of whom had once acted as secretary to the group. It is interesting to note that after John Flynn's death in 1983, Stuart Grundy and Kevin Ormerod, more recent members, showed interest in my research findings. This was not only because they had not been part of my initial research, but also because, at a time when the custom was enjoying considerable media exposure, they had no personal archives upon which to draw in their new roles as secretary and treasurer of the team. Although veteran dancer Dick Shufflebotham had become leader, he was an even more taciturn man than John Flynn and clearly uncomfortable at the prospect of being interviewed by the media. Both Stuart Grundy and Brian Daley performed this task instead, the latter being noted within the team for his enjoyment in "explaining" the custom to a television crew. His characterisation of the custom as a fertility dance was occasionally embellished even further with reference to "rain dances." By 1987, when interviewed by the media, Stuart Grundy was also insisting on the custom's origins in fertility rituals.

Throughout my fieldwork with the dancers, it was evident that concern with historicity was not paramount. Although they showed some curiosity over what I might find through examining historical documents and talking to older dancers and their relatives, the team on the whole was not anxious either to pinpoint specific details onto their past or to augment their existing knowledge. Self-documentation was not important to them, nor did anyone engage in any systematic analysis of the origin tales or study the team's history.

The Explanations of Local Residents

Turning to explanations of the dance as a local custom given by local residents revealed an expected lack of detail, but also the construction of responses in terms of history/origins. The following statements are typical replies to the question, "Can you tell me what it is about?" or "Can you explain the meaning of the custom?"¹⁴

The origin, you mean?

I'm sorry I don't know how they originated.

Well, it goes back quite a long time.

No, I think its a bit lost in history is that — where they began, how they began.

It's supposed to go back quite a few hundred years isn't it? I don't know how it originated.

Well, I'm not too familiar with it but I think it originates back, you know ...

But it's interesting — do *you* know how they originated?

A frequent variant of such responses was “it’s just a tradition” or “I think it’s just to keep a tradition up,” as though continuity in itself were sufficient to explain the custom. Only very occasionally would I be offered an explanation that related to the dancers’ black faces, with “miners” and “Moors” given as reasons.¹⁵ No-one offered a more sustained narrative of the kind found amongst the dancers, however disjointed these are, in fact. Only one person responded with the idea that the dance was a pagan fertility rite¹⁶ except in cases where a copy of Bowden’s *A Bacup Miscellany* was in the home. In the late 1970s and early 1980s then, the local community had no need of origin tales.

My findings coincide with those of anthropologist Jeanette Edwards who spent a year residing in Bacup towards the latter period of my own fieldwork in the area. She describes a person newly removed to the town as “ ... one of the few residents of Bacup who, when I asked about the meaning of the dances, appeared even vaguely interested in the question. ... Generally Bacup people appear not to be interested in attaching meaning to the Coco Nutters and their activities. They neither tell stories of origin, nor provide explanations for the event” (Edwards 2000: 179).

Not surprisingly, those local residents close to the dancers — that is, the musicians, collectors and families — were most able to repeat the Society’s ‘official’ interpretation, or elements of it, at least. This was less the case within the community at large, despite potential exposure via a number of avenues. By the 1930s, the local press began to incorporate aspects of Society literature. During the 1950s, many folk revival enthusiasts, well versed in Society interpretations, interacted with local people at the Easter performances. Since 1972, Bowden’s local history book, which included such details, was to be found in several Bacup homes. Owing, no doubt, to more limited contact with the pronouncements of old-fashioned folkloristic scholarship than the performers, interpretations offered by local residents were typically less detailed and generally revealed less influence from the ‘survivalist’ school of thought.

Most residents professed complete ignorance as to the meaning of the black faces or the origin of the dance. The origin statements made by the dancers were often no more systematic and coherent, however. In interviews and casual conversations, several professed no knowledge of, or interest in, the tradition’s origins. The Cornish miners tale, which most had learnt from within the team, was the most common response to my questions. It is reasonable to conclude *that for most of the performers and the local community, explanations of the origin of the dance were not a high priority*. Such tales merely indicated the longevity of the local custom — this was clearly a component of the unique identity of Bacup.

Maintaining Otherness

By the late 1980s, the team was in need of updating its own publicity material to meet the curiosity of ever-increasing crowds at Easter, as well as the needs of the local Tourist Board. The three-page leaflet produced in 1987 was largely a compilation of the aforementioned 1958 circular letter and the details from the back of the calendar. Added to these are details about the repertoire and a list of the team’s more prestigious engagements. The material concludes with an emphasis

upon the unique character of the custom. The compiler, treasurer, Stuart Grundy, paraphrases John Flynn's earlier caution that the information "is in no way authoritative." In contrast to the perceptions and aspirations of the 1930s, the team denies their identity as Morris Dancers, claiming the category of 'folk dancers' instead. This statement came as no surprise to me, since I knew there was a strong desire on the part of the dancers to separate themselves from the 1970s national revival of regionally based Morris Dance teams, some of whom also blacked their faces.¹⁷ Until this period, the Britannia had been unique within the national folk-scene. By re-casting themselves as 'folk' rather than 'Morris' dancers, the team sought to underline its antiquity and distinctiveness from more recent arrivals who performed ceremonial dance traditions.

On the occasion of the millennium, at Easter, the Britannia dancers produced more written self-representations in the form of a souvenir programme. Entitled *Into 2000 with the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers of Bacup: from the 18th to the 21st Century*, it included a poem in tribute to their leader, Dick Shufflebotham, as well as "History Notes" on the team, and newspaper articles from 1938 and 1983. The dancers' pride in their history and unique status is well captured in a line from the poem, written by one of their number: "T'Nutters'ave got history, Pedigree second t'none."¹⁸

At this time the team was in possession of two of my articles which provide specific historical detail on earlier parallels, both locally (1986) and further abroad (1990). Despite this, the "History Notes" was principally compiled from their own previous literature (see Buckland 1999 for discussion). There are no comments upon gaps in historical continuity, aside from the usual disclaimers of "the picture is by no means clear" and "is in no way authoritative." A distinction between 'folk' and Morris Dances is made once again, and cultural survivals theory is well to the fore: "... the custom of blackened faces may reflect a pagan or mediaeval [sic] background which was done to disguise the dancers from being recognised by evil spirits afterwards, it may also reflect the mining connections" (Millennium Programme, 2000). This is immediately followed by the Moorish miners' legend, taken from previous leaflets. Obviously, the dancers want to provide interesting publicity material not professional historical accounts, yet it is interesting to note which of those interpretations available to them are drawn upon, and which rejected.

As noted earlier, the official and local versions are not necessarily exclusive to one another. In fact, the lack of a definitive history does not detract from but rather *enhances the custom's mystique*. Throughout the literature written by the Society, the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers have been described as "extraordinary," "spectacular," "mysterious," "astonishing" and ultimately, "unique." Indeed, by maintaining their "authenticity" as the Society had requested in the 1929 draft agreement, the Coco-Nut Dancers have managed to preclude imitators and deviance from the established practice. They have thereby capitalised upon their seemingly incomparable appearance to achieve local standing, and a stature and reverence arguably unequalled in the national folk revival. In 1964, Kennedy acknowledged that this

... one English dance belonging to the North Western Morris tradition which is distinctive in a number of its aspects, including dress and in the blacking of the faces of the dancers ... may have been influenced by its close contact with the comparatively recent carnival entertainments popular in this part of England (Kennedy 1964: 48-49).

In the next sentence however, Kennedy immediately asserts that “blacking the face to disguise the person and turn him into a ritual actor is a device inherited from the Stone Age.”

Kennedy was not unique in his beliefs. Throughout the twentieth century the recycling of ‘pagan origin’ theories has continued to attract adherents. These range from those people happy to accept such notions merely as explanations of unusual localised practices, to fervent believers in New Paganism, for whom calendar customs and dance rituals are unquestioned evidence of the continuity of indigenous religious practices alternative to Christianity (see Hutton 1999). It is into the former category that the dancers and community of Bacup principally fall, as is evident from their responses above. Amongst the dancers, there has never been a unanimous acceptance of the ‘pagan origins’ theory. Its citation has tended towards the strategic, rather than being the principal driving force behind participation. Nonetheless, clearly there were (and are) benefits for both the dancers and their community in its interpellation. As I discussed in an earlier paper, the agreement between the dancers and the Society to preserve “the Tradition” and take steps to prevent its imitation resulted in mutual advantage.

The Society could point to a unique ancient tradition, virtually without parallel which could be displayed at its celebrations of regional and national folk culture. The gains for the Britannia team were perhaps more impressive. Indeed, it could be argued that the patronage of the Society guaranteed the continuity of the tradition. Through its provision of performance venues on a countrywide network and granting of academic credence to the custom as a genuine relic of national significance, the Society boosted the dancers’ importance within their own community and pushed them into the national limelight (Buckland 2001a: 58).

The attribution of a mythic past rather than a documented history only enhances the status of the dance as a remarkable prehistorical cultural survival — a living testimony of the pre-industrial and the pre-rational. Whether the origin is located in mediaeval England or Africa, the geographical and temporal locations of this narrative point to an exotic, pre-civilised ‘Other’. Alternative histories that point to Victorian theatre rather than primitive ritual (e.g., Buckland 1990) are omitted from publicity materials and do not necessarily register in the dancers’ own historical beliefs. Although one retired dancer offered a modern origin theory (Buckland 1999: 204-205), the preference amongst more recent recruits tended towards the mix of local and official history recounted by the team. Historicity may have its place in academia, but for dancers and spectators, the lure of “th’owd pagan dance”, endlessly “lost in the mists of time” continues to enchant.

Invented Traditions, Experienced Pasts

This leads to the question of *why* such modes of exegesis on dances and ritual exercise enchantment in twentieth and twenty-first century England? In academic disciplines that have a core interest in the past, such as history, ethnology, folklore and folk life studies, issues of origin, influence, dissemination and causality, continue to be important. This remains the case, despite attention to reflexivity and new notions of objectivity typical of the postmodern turn in academia. Contemporary scholars, however, are more fully aware of the chimerical nature of any attempt to regain any one true version of a historical event or its meaning, and are more cognisant of the intertextual nature of historical knowledge.

Oral history — knowledge of the past communicated orally — has been a recognised source of data in academic scholarship since the second half of the twentieth century (see P. Thompson [1978]1988). As the above material illustrates, however, it is essential to see both archival and oral historiography as constructs of the professionalization of the academic pursuit of history, rather than as two entirely separate domains of knowledge and practice. Henige identifies such inter-relationships between printed word and oral transmission as “feedback,” which “... may be defined as the co-opting of extraneous printed or written information into previously oral accounts. The process occurred very widely, if not obviously” (Henige 1972: 95). Henige’s discussion is a warning to those historians intent on finding ‘authentic’ local material from oral tradition, for the chances are that such material may have its ultimate source in printed matter constructed by outsiders.

Although my concern in this paper is with tracing inter-relationships between written texts and oral transmission in the case of Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers, I do not seek to demonstrate historical veracity *per se*, but neither do I wish to make the case that its pursuit is irrelevant to postmodern scholarship. It has become evident from my field research that to identify specific historical and personal links in the articulation of origin theories and to track them with precision within any ethnographic community is impossible. It is particularly so in a pluralist, literate European society. I have shown that popular and ephemeral literature such as programme notes, publicity material and the like, plus media coverage of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers has been extensive in the second half of the twentieth century and has generated complex intertextual processes. Although significant texts may be dated accurately, the ideas contained therein do not reveal their exact provenance or circulation. My attempt to trace and locate at least some of the feedback process shifts my project from the practice of historiography to that of ethnography. This aligns my approach with that of Cohen, who, in his analysis of the complex inter-relation between texts written by outsider and local experts rejects the “simplistic dichotomy of oral and written” (D. W. Cohen 1994: 231).

Two questions are significant to my examination of the feedback process at work here. First, what is the nature of the ideas and their ascendancy within contemporary written and oral domains? Second, why do these ideas continue to exercise such fascination in this context? This intertwining of historical and ethnographic method is occasioned by a discourse of “tradition” within which performers, audience and myself are located. This discourse reveals at least four prevailing notions about the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers’ past. For the purposes of exegesis, they can be identified as follows:

1. The past as operative through local memory in the recollection in oral accounts of named individuals and events.
2. The past as recorded in enscripted form, e.g., contemporaneous newspapers, letters, programme notes.
3. The pagan origins/fertility account of the EFDS.
4. The Cornish miners legend.

The first two categories circumscribe the nature of the data sources available to outside investigators and the dancers themselves and are not restricted to the

problem of origin and its meanings. Their analysis allows some contextualisation of the latter two categories, which operate as a speculative rather than attested past. Despite potential access to the past discernible from the first two categories — not least in my own articles (1986, 1990) which were given to the dancers — it is this mythic past which is used to explain the custom to outsiders, thereby bestowing upon the practice the prestige and legitimacy of age and mystery. As Anthony Cohen has noted in *The Symbolic Construction of Community*,

It would be a mistake ... to characterize such responses as merely 'traditionalistic', implying that the community in question is mired in its own past and unable to face up to present imperatives. ... Myth confers rightness on a course of action by extending to it the sanctity which enshrouds tradition and lore. Mythological distance lends enchantment to an otherwise murky contemporary view. One reason which accounts for the particular efficacy of myth in this regard is its a-historical character. As one writer has put it, myth is 'beyond time'. It 'blocks off' the past, making it impervious to the rationalistic scrutiny of historians, lawyers and others who may dispute precedent and historiographical validity (P.S. Cohen, 1969). Historians have recently described this process as the 'invention of tradition' (Cohen 1985: 99).

Cohen here refers to Hobsbawm's text, *The Invention of Tradition* which has bequeathed a label and theoretical framework frequently deployed in subsequent scholarly analyses of customary practices.

The term 'invented tradition' is used in a broad, but not imprecise sense. It includes both 'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period ... 'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past ... insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious [*sic*] (Hobsbawm 1983: 1-2).

In this respect, Hobsbawm's sense of the significance of activities which claim a mythical past accords with Cohen's recognition of the

... very imprecision of these references to the past — timelessness masquerading as history — which makes them so apt a device for symbolism and, in particular, for expressing symbolically the continuity of past and present, and for re-asserting the cultural integrity of the community in the face of its apparent subversion by the forces of change (Cohen 1985: 103).

Both scholars treat such historical myth-making as a symptomatic response to modernity. For Hobsbawm, "It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the 'invention of tradition' so interesting for historians of the past two centuries" (Hobsbawm 1983: 2). Yet, as Cohen observes, "Anthropologists tend not to impute such a contrived character to it. They would be more inclined to treat myth as an expression of the way in which people cognitively map past, present and future" (Cohen 1985: 99).

This tendency to attribute an almost fraudulent character to the myth-making is no doubt, in part, a result of coupling the terms 'invented' and 'tradition' which suggests a spuriousness or lack of authenticity to the practice. A close reading of

Hobsbawm, however, reveals that this was probably not his intention. Hobsbawm and Ranger's theoretical trajectory is best understood as an explanation of responses to the development of the nation state (Hobsbawm 1983: 1-2), as is also the case with Comaroff and Comaroff (1992).¹⁹ It has contributed to a critical literature on 'folk' customs which similarly reveal processes of traditionalization in relation to claims of authenticity and nationalism (see, for example, Brandes 1990; Noyes and Abrahams 1999 and Felföldi and Buckland 2002).

In the case under consideration here, we know that the EFDS's patronage of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers began within the nationalist framework of 'folk culture'. However, given the well established nation state identity of early twentieth century Great Britain, the 'folk movement' did not need harnessing to direct political aims for the establishment of a politically and economically separate England. England had long been the conquering colonial power within the union of Scotland, Wales and Ireland and the lead power within the extensive British Empire. There was a well-established sentiment of English nationalism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Colls and Dodd 1986; Sykes 1993 and Francmanis 2000), although its influence was limited. There was, for example, no appropriation of localised practices for the establishment of a state folk ensemble in the manner of the Soviet Union and its constituent countries.²⁰ In England, revivals of ceremonial dances from the 1920s onwards were at the local, amateur level, even if many of these were no longer performed in their earlier locations. The maintenance and display of traditional ceremonial dance teams increasingly became a distinctive feature that guided the direction of the institutionalised English national folk revival. This was particularly the case after the Second World War, when Kennedy was a key figure in promoting "tradition" as a desirable model of practice (see Boyes 1993).

Local patronage underpinned the maintenance of Coco-Nut Dancing even after discovery by the national institution. In any case, the EFDS as an institution had neither the political authority nor wealth to offer full national patronage, despite its national and international standing. Its patronage was largely intellectual, although the dancers would receive expenses and occasionally money for time lost at work when invited to perform within the national and regional circuit of folk displays and festivals. In this respect, the Coco-Nut Dancers were treated in much the same way as other teams of ceremonial dancers 'discovered' by the EFDS. Consequently, local support was essential, not only in terms of financial patronage, but also in maintaining a sense of the authentic environment of the dancing in its annual local appearance and reception. In the case of Bacup, the street licences granted by local authorities, and the street collections the dancers made to offset expenses (for costumes, drinks, and payment of the musicians) indicate a clear commitment by the local community to their custom. Elsewhere in England, changes in taste and leisure, emigration, street control, class estrangement and the forces of the Victorian rational recreation movement and other reformist strategies of the nineteenth century, had led to a decline in patronage of street customs at the local level (see, for example, Buckland 1991; Bushaway 1982; Chandler 1993; Howkins 1981). There were, however, a number of features in Bacup that facilitated a meeting of the national agenda with that of the local community.

The value placed upon 'ancient cultural distinctiveness' by middle-class intellectuals operating within the folk paradigm in the 1920s accorded with this particular urban community's larger sense of its own identity. Even during the late nineteenth century, outside commentators noted an independence and self-sufficient identity within the Rossendale Valley; an area then at the height of industrial prosperity and known as the Golden Valley. This identity was especially the case within Bacup (Webb 1979: 164, 166; Newbigging 1893: 304-11). The twentieth century witnessed a period of decline in the Valley, however, as the British Empire lost its economic and political supremacy in world trade. The industries of cotton, carpet making, slipper manufacture, quarrying and mining no longer provided the secure employment formerly enjoyed by Bacupians. This led to considerable emigration in the 1950s and 1960s, leaving the community without a direct rail link and with limited fast road transport of the type needed to compete in the changing national scene from manufacturing to service industries. Positioned at the end of a narrow valley, next to the Pennine Hills, Bacup was not in a good geographical position. Unable to invest in new one-storey warehouses, by the 1980s many of its mills, former symbols of local investment and industrial supremacy, had been demolished.²¹

If local retention of nineteenth-century manufacturing ideals was in part to blame for the economic failures of Bacup (Sixsmith 1978: chap. 6) the commitment to pride in the local past and a sense of discrete identity continued to be articulated within the community. This attitude is manifested specifically in the two most well-regarded local institutions: the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers and the 'Nat' or Bacup Natural History Museum, both of which link to the town's earlier days of nineteenth century economic strength. Residents do not see these as anachronisms, but rather as encapsulations of local pride in the past. This is not to say that every person in Bacup is a supporter of these practices.²² However, both institutions provide continuity for a community populated predominantly by people born within the Rossendale Valley, which, at the time of my fieldwork in the 1980s, was suffering from even more pronounced economic recession. It is evident that for many, the Coco-Nut Dancers provided visible proof of an embodied continuity with a local, personalised past. Such findings accord with those of Edwards (2000: 175) who notes that "[T]he Nutters are evidence of an unbroken continuity with the past and their public appearances symbolize the survival of a unique and resilient Bacup in the face of social and economic change." Edwards also cites a new resident from a nearby town who associates the survival of the custom with the survival of the town (2000:176). This accords with local statements about the uniqueness of the tradition in response to my questions, such as, "We've got what no-one else has got," "Well, they're world famous for it, aren't they?" and "It's just something for Bacup, isn't it? It's a Bacup ... It is Bacup" (19th July 1979).

For the dancers, more explicitly, it is the distinctive and choreographically complex nature of the repertoire that embodies this continuity, as well as the fact that the tradition is unique to the town and to them as a representative group of local individuals (Buckland 2001c). When asked if the age of the dance tradition mattered to him, dancer Derek Pilling stated, "I think it does really. Because it's something that's been handed down and handed down and it's all been handed by word of mouth and practical help in learning the steps. It's not something you can just go

and pick up a book, read about, go and do it. Impossible. It's got to be — it's that sort of dance that it's got to be handed down from man to man" (cited in Buckland 1995:53).

This sense of ownership is not a recent phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, the dancers themselves sought to retain rights over their performance in the draft agreement drawn up with the EFDS in the late 1920s. Fear of its being stolen by the south of England was being voiced in the 1950s also (see Buckland 2001a). In part this exhortation to protect the dance from southerners may be a reference to the London based headquarters of the EFDS, but no doubt it also signals the traditional north-south antagonism in England. By the mid-twentieth century at least, the north had become a poor partner to the more affluent south (see Buckland, forthcoming). It was the *uniqueness* of the cultural practice which required protection and proclamation. This has now become so well established that the dancers are less concerned about documentation of their repertoire by outsiders. More recently, the dancers' publicity sheet proudly summarises their achievement and status. Edwards also notes the Coco-Nut Dancers' understanding of their history and unique identity by citing their publicity sheet; "Whatever the history one thing is certain, wherever the "Nutters" go their appearance and the name of Bacup remain vivid in the memory of the people, because nowhere in Great Britain is there a traditional team quite like us. In a word we are unique" (cited in Edwards 2000: 180).

The concluding phrase has become a slogan repeated on the Coco-Nutter's website.²³ Significantly, this site is maintained by the Rossendale Tourist Board. As with a number of Pennine settlements, tourism — in the form of moorland scenery and industrial heritage — is increasingly viewed as a means of bringing some prosperity back into the region. Until very recently, however, Bacup was neglected as part of this drive. Within the context of heritage tourism, the Coco-Nut Dancers chime well with the past of living memory, but they also offer connections to a pre-industrial inheritance.

During the 1980s, other local groups such as community theatre and folk clubs sometimes attempted to capitalise upon the large crowds who visit Bacup to witness the dancers' Easter performance — a practice with which the dancers were not happy. In the year of the millennium, however, in an unusual move, the Britannia team organised their own festival of dance on Easter Saturday. They invited teams of dancers with whom they had performed outside the district to dance in the streets of Bacup. This was perceived as an honour by the selected visiting teams. The Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers saw this as a way to repay such teams for their hospitality elsewhere and an opportunity to compare themselves with other teams on home ground. It also provided entertainment for the local community. The programme notes made clear the distinctiveness, age and unique identity of the Coco-Nut Dancers. When the compère (an unusual feature for Easter Saturday) introduced the Coco-Nut Dancers' performance in the town centre, he used material from the 'pagan origins' narrative interlaced with the Cornish miners' origin story from the programme notes. The roar of appreciation and applause from the waiting crowd of mostly local people was considerable when he concluded by announcing the Nutters as "your own." Through this event, the dancers' simultaneously demonstrated their affiliation to the community, their status in the world of folk

performance, and their unique identity and history. The idiosyncrasy of Bacup as a community was publicly affirmed and confirmed by this comparative display.

At a quotidian level then, we can say that the 'pagan origins' theory does not contribute to the dancers' and community's commitment to the custom. For the dancers, enjoyment, male camaraderie, local and national prestige, pride in a unique local tradition, and the pleasure of entertaining others are more important. This is equally the case for the community. Although there is by no means a consensus of unswerving appreciation, the tradition is nevertheless part of every Bacupian's individual history and an assertion of a proud, local independence. Edwards also notes this perceived relationship between the histories of the dance group and the community: "Their idiosyncratic and unique past mirrors an idiosyncratic and unique Bacup, both past and present" (2000: 180).

My evidence suggests that the 'pagan origins' theory may be called upon to substantiate and authenticate the practice predominantly in contexts where onlookers do not share this local experiential history. This is by no means a marketing ploy by which the dancers deliberately dismiss my alternative reading of a wider nineteenth-century theatrical history. As my interaction with them has made clear, the possibility of an origin beyond documented time is as attractive to some dancers as it is to visiting audiences. Whenever conversation has turned to my historical research, I have had to confess that I cannot prove direct localised connections with nineteenth century theatre. Not surprisingly, some dancers who joined in the 1980s have expressed a preference for their own publicised version of the past, which links the local legend with pagan origins.

Primitive Origins, Modern Times

This discussion has been concerned primarily with past interaction between the local and the national via identified individuals and institutions, together with modes of transmission such as publicity, press, and accounts believed at the time to be expert opinion. How the 'feedback' on dances, meaning and ritual is used within the ethnographic community has been my prime consideration. However, the very concept of an ethnographic community, or 'the field' has undergone considerable revision in recent years. Problems concerning the 'social and spatial encapsulation' traditionally pursued in anthropology have been raised (Amit 2000: 5; see also Hastrup and Ólwig 1997). This is not to suggest that relations between the local and national were ignored earlier in the discipline of anthropology. Within the anthropology of Britain, for example, Cohen's edited collections (1982, 1986) on community and identity have addressed, to varying degrees, relations of the micro to the macro principally through synchronic studies.

In studies of cultural practices where readily accessible past documentation exists, the challenge is to consider local practice as related to historical practices and institutions, and to situate these within a national framework rather than in a social and temporal vacuum. This is especially the case when that community (as traditionally conceived in anthropological terms) consistently invokes the past to interpret the present. In identifying the rise, dissemination and application of a particular heuristic paradigm over much of the twentieth century, I have tried to

show how the views and expectations of transient visitors to the ethnographic community, through printed as well as verbal means of communication, contribute to potential interpretations:

Bacupian responses to transient members of their community who cite 'pagan origins' theory are little different from the responses encountered by enactors of local traditions at many calendar custom observances elsewhere in England today (see Boyes 1987-88). The evolutionist explanation of ritual promoted by Tylor and Frazer and others in their wake has become part of an accepted popular understanding, filtered down from middle class reading habits of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And yet, as Beard (1992: 223) pointed out in her analysis of Frazer's immediate and enduring impact, "The success of *The Golden Bough* rests on the undeniable fact that it is so rarely read." It is, indeed, in her words, "a lurking presence," and not only in terms of its stimulus upon the literary imagination (see Vickery 1973). For most of the twentieth century, the legacy of *The Golden Bough* within folklore studies has been to stifle scholarly advancement. Likewise, within anthropological studies of the dance, its critical dismissal has occurred only fairly recently (see Williams 1991: 76-83; Chao 2001: 110-111). Frazerian ideas about dances and ritual were found most notably in the influential writings of his contemporary, Jane Harrison (see Ackerman 1991, Williams 1991). Hutton (1999: 123) suggests, however, that exclusive emphasis upon *The Golden Bough* "is at once to flatter and to blame Frazer unduly" since he shared with other scholars these ideas that were "part of the spirit of their age, and related to so many of its deepest concerns" (1999: 131). Harrison and Frazer both appear in the bibliographies of Kennedy's publications, together with other writers of their persuasion. There is no doubt that the world view of these late Victorian and Edwardian writers harmonised with, and left a pervasive influence on, the intelligentsia of their age and subsequent decades. This is so, even if it was the case that their actual publications were rarely read directly outside of their own middle class milieu. Their legacy was profound in studies of English customs, dances and dramas up until the 1970s (see Buckland 1982a, 2001b), the dissemination of their ideas occurring principally through the press, radio, television and popular literature.

This paper has demonstrated that for the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers and their community, the interpretive framework provided by the ideas of Tylor and Frazer and their followers legitimizes and contributes to a sense of distinctive identity, when necessary. But what is its value to visitors and its attraction for the purposes of tourism and publicity? If, as Hutton (1999:131) argues, 'pagan origins' theory has become a "classic intellectual paradigm," what were and are the forces which have led to its acceptance and continuation? A full response to this question lies outside of the scope of this essay but some reflection on perceived antipathies between primitive pasts and modern presents indicates that potential answers can be located within the 'grand narrative' of modernity.

The growing acceptance and popularity of 'pagan origins' theory gained hold at a time when " ... the consciousness of living in a new age, a new material context, and a form of society totally different from anything that had ever occurred before was by the turn of the century so widespread as to constitute a genuine and distinctive element in the mental culture of the period (Harris 1994: 32).

Imperialism, rapid industrialization and urbanization had brought puzzling alternative societies and practices into view, together with, in some quarters, a sense that 'progress' had brought an accompanying alienation from nature and the past. Beard (1992) considers that Frazer's *Golden Bough* provided an overarching and rationalistic framework of interpretation for the world's seemingly strange cultural practices. This certainly accords with the Weberian diagnosis of modern alienation and the consequential "growing demand that the world and the total pattern of life be subject to an order that is significant and meaningful" (Weber 1968: 506).

From Beard's perspective, the work of Frazer answered the quest for a new and cohesive world view in the face of growing secularity, and growing knowledge of cultural practices 'other' to those of European metropolitan life. In contrast, Hutton concludes that the work of Tylor and Frazer "fostered not so much an enhanced respect for rationalism and progress as a delight in the primitive and the unreasonable" (1999: 117). Drawing upon research on the country and the city, and recent revisionist studies of the discipline of folklore, Hutton's analysis (1999: 112-131) locates such sentiments in the rapidly changing social and economic contexts of the late eighteenth century. As a consequence, an influential intellectual metropolitan elite came to experience a rural nostalgia, and saw urban life not as progress but as a form of moral, spiritual and social deprivation. Following Edmund Leach (1961), Hutton identifies the fascination with pagan origins as a further symptom of modernity — as a late Victorian and Edwardian belief in unknown, dark, but more natural forces which might offer redemption to contemporary man-made culture.

Hutton argues that this world view was not restricted to that period but persists to this day as an aspect of English culture, with the 1930s appearing as "a particularly febrile decade for such interpretations" (1999: 128). This was precisely the time when the dances of the Britannia Coco-Nutters were being re-cast as a survival of primitive ritual by Douglas Kennedy. Kennedy's publications unswervingly follow this romantic portrayal of a lost countryside; of a presumed natural, animal instinct for dancing, and a dark, barbaric past. His preface to *England's Dances* is typical:

Dancing is the oldest of the arts. It has its origins in the animal world and its roots are buried deep down in human nature. Long before it became an art, dancing figured as a ritual in tribal custom and primitive religion. From the ancient rituals of the past are descended the Folk-Dances of today. Any study of their origin involves reference to the story of mankind as a whole (Kennedy 1949: 11).

For the majority of revivalist English folk dancers, the views of Kennedy and Sharp were not to be challenged (see Boyes 1993). In part, this reflects the non-professionalized study of the 'folk' performing arts in England until the 1970s and 1980s, when serious scholarly critiques (e.g., Harker 1972, 1985; Gammon 1980; Buckland 1982) were made of this dominant literature, most of which had been written for the general reader or revivalist dancer. Despite its very public dismissal within the world of revivalist folk dancing later on, the appeal of pagan origins theory continues to linger in some quarters, and may be encountered in the various publicity materials of Morris Dance teams. Such accounts undoubtedly legitimated groups of middle-class men dancing in public during a century when such practices were frequently perceived by the English public as belonging exclusively to a female

domain. Yet it is also clear that assigning pagan origins to a strange custom continues to fascinate.

My study of the Coco-Nut Dancers has illustrated that the pagan ritual theory is not necessarily systematic or uppermost in the minds of participants. Both performers and audience focus instead on the enjoyment of participating in and watching the spectacle of Coco-Nut Dancing. In addition to providing a useful rationale to continue their performances, the pagan origins theory also gives the dancers a shorthand response to outsiders, who have a tendency to require literal explanations when faced with dancing as ritual activity. The explanation thereby satisfies the apparent need for an exotic theory to match the exotic appearance of the dancers and the dancing. As Schneider has argued, "Enchantment ... is part of our normal condition, and far from having fled with the rise of science, it continues to exist (though often unrecognized) wherever our capacity to explain the world's behaviour is slim" (Schneider 1993: x).

In the case of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers, it is important to note that an available alternative history has not been incorporated into their narrative about themselves, perhaps because it sits too close to the present — it requires confronting issues of race. It may be that comparatively recent histories are too uncomfortable in a world now alert to the political realities of postcolonialism and the ethnic mix of contemporary Britain. The black face, for example, is perceived as, and indeed does act as, a personal disguise for the dancers, as noted above. It also signifies an additional and conflicting origin: that of blackface minstrelsy and the theatre. This fact necessitates identifying the practice with a comparatively recent, artificial, urban and imperialist history, in contrast to a remote, natural, rural and simple community heritage evoking an unknowing innocence. As Lowenthal has noted in his stimulating study of the heritage industry, "remoteness ... purifies, shifting the older past from the personal to the communal realm" (1985: 53).

In recent years, invitations to the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers for media appearances have come attached with a ban on "blacking up." The dancers have turned down these opportunities as a result, asserting their rights to the traditional costuming, which they maintain is a ritual disguise and not a representation of African-ness. The actual origin of this practice is complicated and now irretrievable. Without doubt, there is a long history in England of blacking the face to undertake anti-social behaviour within the contexts of both the riot and the ludic (see Thompson 1975, 1993). A number of calendrical customs in England used the device of blacking the face for the purposes of disguise long before the popular introduction of American blackface minstrelsy in the mid-nineteenth century. Even then, its meanings differed for English audiences, as Pickering (1997) has argued. Such facts and interpretations must not be forgotten or ignored. It is too simplistic, and indeed inaccurate, to deconstruct the Britannia custom as an 'invented tradition' in the sense of something created to foster a sense of ancientness. Nor, indeed, have historical records come to light that firmly fix this vernacular tradition as a direct import from blackface minstrelsy and associated performances on the nineteenth century stage. At the local level, historical records confirm that there were a number of traditional black-faced street activities in Rossendale and elsewhere in Lancashire prior to the First World War that used the black face as a mask and/or disguise (Buckland 1990; Cass 2001).

However, as memories of these activities fade, those unfamiliar with the custom of Coco-Nut Dancing have shifted the symbolic meaning of the black face to that of representing a person of African origin. In north-west England, where racial tension exists in a number of urban communities, a custom perceived as an African import or as a representation of an African practice would please neither right nor left wing elements in society. The fact that most immigrants in the region hail from Asia not Africa is not especially relevant in a context where the population may frequently be perceived by locals as simply "white" and "non-white." The outbreak of racial violence in the nearby towns of Oldham and Burnley in the summer of 2001 made this abundantly clear.²⁴ In this respect, too, the "old-fashioned word 'Moor' is temporarily removed from the English experience of black people and thus contributes to the aura of exoticism, enhancing the feeling of 'otherness'" (Buckland 1990: 9).

To have a past in pre-history seems to de-politicise the custom, yet it actually aligns Coco-Nut Dancing with the almost exclusively white population of Bacup. Here, then, pagan origins theory could be called upon to assert territorial and behavioural rights in appealing to that "[d]elight in continuity and cumulation [which] is integral to English appreciation of *genius loci*, the enduring idiosyncrasies that lend places their precious identity" (Lowenthal 1985: xviii). In a town experiencing continued economic and population decline, this heritage is both particular to Bacup and simultaneously indicative of a national fascination with a remote yet tangible and arguably white "Englishness." The needs and visions of performers, local community and visitors coincide in their desire to maintain singularity, mystery and enchantment. They accomplish this through a perception of dancing and ritual which refuses a historicist deconstruction, preferring instead an enduring image of continuity; one more evocative than detailed, more fantastical than probable, and at once more exotic and rooted than any explanation which rational inquiry and 'civilisation' could provide.

Conclusions

This paper offers several contributions to critical studies of the enduring influence of nineteenth-century social evolutionism in relation to customary performance rituals. First, the example of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers provides a detailed illustration of the pervasive power of this European intellectual paradigm in relation to a *dance* custom. The paper demonstrates how speculative histories circulate which are full of unsupported assumptions about dance forms as cultural survivals of a primitive ritual past and which supposedly testify to earlier stages of human development. Consequently, it complements and expands Williams's critical discussion of this intellectual legacy in relation to the dance (1991). It does so through the presentation of historical and ethnographic perspectives on a specific case study.

Second, these perspectives facilitate a detailed analysis of situated intertextuality in relation to explanations of the meanings of a dance ritual. A complex dialogic process emerges (Bakhtin 1981) in which genres — operating within pseudo-academic and populist contexts as well as those of the performers — are drawn upon to answer the explanatory needs of the moment. Dominant within this attempt

at explanation is the use of cultural survivals theory and local aetiological legend, often brought into creative dialogue with each other. Comparison can be drawn with Bauman's case study (1992) of the narration of an Icelandic legend in which contextualization, traditionalization and authentication occur at the level of the story teller.²⁵ The dialogic is crucial in this process of tradition making. Bauman recognises that "tradition" is not a fixed entity but a fluid instrumental device which can transform the status of cultural practice and actor.

Tradition ... is a rhetorical resource, not an inherent quality of a story. To be sure, tradition is always such a resource, but in folklore and anthropology traditionalization has overwhelmingly been a resource of intellectual outsiders, a means of selectively and analytically valorizing, legitimizing, and managing aspects of culture frequently not their own by establishing them within lineages of descent and patterns of distribution for scholarly rhetorical and analytical purposes. Examination of this text highlights the significance of a complementary strategy at the folk level, the active construction of links tying the present to the past (Bauman 1992: 140-41).

In the case of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers, however, such strategies are not merely complementary but dynamically interactive. My analysis of these texts that are created and re-created whenever an explanation of the 'meaning' of Coco-Nut dancing is required, exposes a false division in classic folklore studies, between 'insider informant' and 'outsider investigator' as necessarily holding different interpretive views of ritual action. This case study reveals that both 'uneducated insiders' and 'educated outsiders' may adopt the same intellectual paradigm. And not surprisingly, they often profess similar values of authenticity and antiquity within their texts. Methodologically, this means that contemporary fieldworkers must address such origin narratives as ethnographic data in order to examine their intertextual nature. These texts, both written and spoken, may enshrine earlier modes of scholarly explanation, but their appearance across a diversity of contexts and not just within the classically conceived ethnographic field site may reveal the provenance and use of important contemporary beliefs, attitudes and tactics.

Third, the paper demonstrates that these origin narratives cannot be dismissed merely as evidence of ill-informed use of poor and outdated scholarship. They are also a means of claiming and promoting cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Performers, local people, and festival organisers, must embrace the cultural power which the intellectual paradigm affords for it to operate effectively. Compliance with such interpretations on a cultural level beyond the immediate locality is thus essential to their persistence. Claims of uniqueness and pedigree contribute to the maintenance of a localised identity and, almost by default, to an often-latent sense of Englishness, rarely articulated as such, but nonetheless still present.

Fourth, I have examined the use of 'cultural survivals' with respect to socio-historical and cultural factors that are experienced simultaneously as local, national and indicative of a wider framework of European modernity. I have argued that the explanation of European calendrical dance customs as a continuity of pagan rituals in contemporary life is of greater significance to those involved than the misapplication of an outdated framework of interpretation. The enduring appeal of cultural survivals theory also suggests rather more than the misidentification of pre-modern dance practices within modern contexts. Within this paradigm, such dances are not just construed as pre-modern, in the absence of rigorous historical data they

are positioned as the 'authentic Other' in contrast to 'the modern'. This is well illustrated by MacDonald in her anthropological study of the traditionalization of Gaelic culture:

That 'tradition' and 'community' are perceived as 'authentic' is only possible in light of a contrast with something posited as inauthentic, namely 'the modern' and 'society'. In its way, then 'tradition' as a semantically conspicuous category is itself a product of modern society ... not evidence that [practices designated as tradition] have been left out of modernity's equations (Macdonald 1997: 3-4).

This recalls the binary oppositions upon which the folk paradigm itself is predicated. It follows that the use of social evolutionism as a means to position calendrical dance forms as the 'authentic Other' *is itself symptomatic of modernity*. Furthermore, to draw upon Hobsbawm's notion of 'invented tradition' in order to discuss the Britannia Coco-Nut dancers as a phenomenon of modernity, runs the risk of colluding with an ahistorical dichotomy between 'experienced modern' and 'unknowable but authentic ancient'. As Kirschenblatt-Gimblett puts it, "The atavism of something genuine or real, even if it never materializes, is present in Eric Hobsbawm's notion that organic community and custom are genuine" (1995: 375). Yet it is precisely that atavism which is at the heart of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers' acceptance as a local and national treasure. Gaps in the precise historical record of a custom's provenance provide the lack of knowledge essential for this to flourish. This paper shows that the power of choosing an imprecise or erroneous historical narrative over a more plausible alternative lies precisely in the ambiguity and mystery which such origin texts engender. Concrete belief in the pagan origins of the dance may rarely be articulated or indeed, not entirely believed by performers and audience, both local and further afield. Nonetheless, the resulting sense of mystery nurtures a desire for enchantment. Watching and reflecting upon the custom of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dance offers an opportunity, whether real or imagined, to stand outside of quotidian modern life. It is an interpretive strategy applied to dances perceived as rituals, which, given similar socio-cultural and historical factors, is undoubtedly to be met with elsewhere.

Notes:

¹ See, for example, Agger (1999) on a re-consideration of Bakhtin's principles employed in media studies.

² The only other known reference occurs in a 1932 local press report which states that the dancers "brought luck in their train." The possibility exists, of course, that the 1932 reporter was working from earlier newspaper files.

³ The English Folk Dance Society (EFDS), established in 1911, was a national society for the study and revival of English folk dancing with headquarters in London and regional bases. The EFDS undoubtedly contributed to the stability and consciousness of the Bacup tradition (Buckland, 2001a). In 1932 it became the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS).

⁴ Karpeles' notes are housed in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Cecil Sharp House, London, NW1 7AY.

⁵ For Tylor's relevance to the early development of folklore studies, see Dorson (1968: 187-196) and Bennett (1994). For his role in the development of British anthropology, see Lienhardt ([1963]

1999) and Barnard (2000: 35-36). For Tylor and Frazer on theories of the dance see Williams (1991, chapters 4 and 5).

⁶ For an overview of interpretations of Morris Dancing from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, see Buckland (1982a) and Forrest (1999, chapter 1).

⁷ On the reception and representation of people from Africa in Europe, see Donald and Rattansi 1992, especially the essays by Fanon and Gilman.

⁸ For example, " ... it is hard to believe that they really are an indigenous growth", *Folk Dance Festival Programme*, De Montfort Hall (20th November 1948). "Black faces, white barrel skirts, black breeches — what could be more un-English," *Royal Albert Hall Programme*, (14th-15th February, 1969). "What country do they come from? When told England, the information is often greeted with astonishment." *Royal Albert Hall Programme* (16th-17th February 1973). All programmes are housed in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.

⁹ Alford (1952), Kennedy (1964: 48-49), and the *Royal Albert Hall Programme* (6-8 January 1949), all express uncertainties as to the custom's authenticity that are refuted using cultural survivalist theory.

¹⁰ See Buckland (1990) and Judge (1997: 321-22) for further examples of blackfaced dancers in the theatre; Pickering (1997) for a consideration of blackface theatre in England; Gottschild (1996) for a wider critical history of blackface minstrelsy.

¹¹ This was a summer processional custom of taking rushes to the parish church to strew them on the floor. It was often accompanied by Morris Dancing in Lancashire during the nineteenth century. See Buckland (1982b).

¹² All interviews and fieldnotes cited are in the author's possession.

¹³ Black face affords the dancers a degree of anonymity in performance. Many of the dancers appreciate this due to negative English attitudes towards men dancing in public and wearing an unusual costume which includes a skirt. These associations with women's activities and dress lead the dancers to refer emphatically to the skirt as a kilt (a recognised attire for Scottish men). For further consideration of black face and its meanings see Buckland (1990).

¹⁴ These quotations are from recorded interviews with the following informants respectively: 81 year old woman, 24 Glen Crescent, 17 July 1979; Mrs Sidebottom, Burnley Road (daughter of pre World War One dancer), 17 July 1979; Woman in 70s, Newchurch Road, 17 July 1979; Man in 70s, Stacksteads, 17 July 1979; Man in 50s, Stacksteads, 19 July 1979; Middle-aged woman, Stacksteads, 19 July 1979; Woman in 40s, 24 Plantation Street, 17 July 1979.

¹⁵ For example, "Well I have heard that they black their faces like these blackamoor types" (old lady, Bacup); "It's Moorish in origin obviously isn't it? Morris Dancing and they were blacks" (woman in 50s); "This was a big mining community wasn't it and it was all clogs and black faces" (woman in mid 30s, Bacup centre). Buckland, Fieldnotes, 14 April 1981.

¹⁶ "Well, yeah, it's supposed to be a primitive fertility rite" (man in 50s, Britannia).

¹⁷ One prominent example is "The Shropshire Bedlams" a team who generated a revival based on oral and written historical material plus creative invention. They inspired a number of new teams claiming historical continuity with the Morris Dancing practised on the borders of south Wales and England. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such teams frequently included blackface minstrel songs and tunes in their repertoire. Black-faced Molly Dancing from East Anglia was also revived in the 1970s.

¹⁸ The poem was originally written by dancer, Joe Healey, in celebration of Dick Shufflebotham's 40 years of Coco-Nut dancing. It was amended for the millennium publication. It is very much in

the tradition of the earlier Bill o' Bows poem (Heyworth 1954), although much shorter. Such recitations in the local dialect are not peculiar to the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers in this region.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Professor Saul Dubow of the University of Sussex for reminding me of this context.

²⁰ On the use of folkloric performance for state political purposes, see Giurchescu (1987), Rice (1994: 169-223), Oztürkmen (1994) and Shay (1999).

²¹ This depiction is based on Elliott (1976), Newbigging (1893), North (1962), Sixsmith (1978), Smith (1969) and Tupling (1927).

²² My fieldnotes do include some negative responses. See Edwards (2000) for a more detailed treatment, and Buckland (1984).

²³ See <http://www.rossendale-pages.co.uk/coconutters/history.htm/2002>.

²⁴ See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/in_depth/uk/2001/summer_of_violence and <http://www.irr.org.uk/riots>. For the inclusion/exclusion of Bacup inhabitants, see Edwards (2000). For the wider context, see Mason (2000) and Ramdin (1999).

²⁵ I am indebted to Dr. Brenda Farnell for drawing this text to my attention and for her perceptive comments.

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