The Use of Black Make-Up in Morris Costume

The Squire and Officers of the Morris Ring have been privy to the legal advice received by the Morris Federation, and have discussed this at length with them and the Open Morris. It is clear it is an uncertain and developing issue that will need to be kept under review.

Past Squire Adam Garland put the following statement on the Morris Ring web page in response to a number of enquiries from the national press:

It appears that there have been a number of articles written about this matter recently accompanied by some ill-informed comments concerning racism. I have heard a number of theories regarding the origin of the practice of ‘blacking-up,’ but the one which seems to be most popular is that performers of the dance knew begging was illegal so disguised themselves by rubbing soot on their faces.

All over the world one finds traditional folk customs for which costume and face paint are integral parts, for example certain tribal dancers in Africa white their faces for the performance. In England, the Morris world is no different; many Morris Clubs use face paint as part of their costume.

The theory of the tradition originating as a form of disguise through the use of soot has been well documented. These days within the three organisations, the Morris Ring, the Morris Federation and the Open Morris, a whole range of different colours can be seen in many places around the country.

The use of one particular colour within these costumes is in no way a statement against one particular societal group and the Morris community refutes the accusation of racism most strongly.

Eddie Worrall, Squire of the Ring, has issued this further statement:

Over the Summer Adam Garland issued a short statement about the issue of using black face paint in Morris and in particular the Morris Ring. Adam’s comments still hold good today.

I do not believe there is any intentionally racist behaviour in any of our member clubs who perform like this. I am also sure all of us would want to see action taken against any club who did intend to offend.

The opening paragraph of the Morris Ring’s Constitution reads:-

1. The object of the Morris Ring shall be to encourage the performance of the Morris, to maintain its traditions and to preserve its history; to bring into contact all the Men’s Morris Clubs or Teams. The purpose of the Ring is not to replace or supersede the existing organisations, but to subserve them. The Clubs shall in all respects retain their independence, ...

This is the sound basis on which over 80 years of association between Morris Ring clubs has been founded. It recognises the independence of a club and its right to choose how to perform. This clearly extends to the use of black face paint in (for example) Welsh Border dancing as much as any other aspect of Morris.

As many of you will know an issue arose at Shrewsbury Folk Festival in 2015 where a complaint was made about a Border Morris side. The essence of the complaint was that the use of black face paint was Racially Harassing under the terms of the Equality Act 2010, and therefore could give rise to a Civil claim against the side and the Folk Festival. That particular allegation was never taken any
further, but did cause change in the booking policy of Shrewsbury Folk Festival and much debate in the Morris world.

The nature of any such claim would be particular to the facts of the case. However, it is clear that sides using black face paint in their performance will be open to such allegations.

The Morris Ring is not a regulator or governing body. It is for sides to decide themselves how they wish to perform. However, clubs will need to clearly understand why they are using black face paint, and be open about why they are performing using it with their audience, local communities and press. They must also be ready to defend their arguments if challenged.

Nigel Strudwick, Eastern Area rep, has put together this short paper on the historical references regarding the use of black face paint in English Traditional Dance. I hope this will be of help.

The Joint Morris Organisations continue to communicate on this issue and will monitor how it develops. In the meantime, if any member side has any direct experience of this as an issue please contact me and the other Officers.

_Eddie Worrall_
_Squire of the Morris Ring_

_The paper authored by Nigel Strudwick follows. Nigel is an eminent academic but not a Morris historian; the paper is not intended to be totally comprehensive and if you have additional pertinent material not included therein, please do contact Nigel or the Ring Officers to highlight it._
A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE ON ‘BLACKING UP’ IN TRADITIONAL DANCE

I am not a Morris or traditional dance researcher, but I wanted to put together some sort of historical overview of the tradition of ‘blacking up’ that has hit the media and the internet so much of late due to its supposed ‘racist’ overtones. What is sorely lacking in most of the comments made by various contributors is a failure to go back to the original sources to see what we can actually learn about the practice insofar as it affects the Morris. Instead, they let their prejudices or preconceptions prevail. I suppose this is just the latest example of the traditional world’s reluctance to look at what is actually known, rather than repeating tired old images—the one that jumps to mind is that Morris is a survival of a ‘pagan ritual’, which has now mostly been retired over the past twenty years. However, that is largely harmless, whereas the present controversy about ‘blacking up’ could rear up and threaten to bite us, not unlike the Equality Act did in a different guise with female musicians, and before that the Licensing Act.

Before I move to the literature, or really rather a selection of it, I should mention terminology. As far as the Morris is concerned, by virtue of the sheer numbers partaking in it, the issue of ‘blacking up’ overwhelmingly concerns the Border Morris, in which dancers place a coloured material on their faces; the black version of this is the only one to court controversy. Molly falls into the same category, as indeed does some Mumming, but there are fewer sides overall. I shall return to the vexed question of the Britannia Coconut Dancers later. Border and Molly have been much less studied than, for example, Cotswold, and Border seems indeed only to have gained its name in the 1960s. Also in terminology, there may be a case for distinguishing between ‘blacking up’ and ‘blackface’ for a variety of reasons, in the present context the most important of which is the general identification of the latter with Minstrelsy. This is because there is no doubt that the latter has distinct racial overtones. Hence my preferred term for the practice we are surveying is ‘blacking up’.

Please remember as you read that the following surveys the literature, does not go back to the primary sources, and attempts no new research.

1. Background to Border Morris


This article is best known for being the first investigation into what we now call Border Morris and in which the term ‘Welsh Border Morris’ was proposed (p. 207). My purpose is not to look at the history of the style, but rather simply to document the place of ‘blacking up’ within the tradition.

The earliest record in this article of black faces occurs the latter part of the 19th century, in Much Wenlock (perhaps 1879–1880 and on, Cawte, p. 202), in Broseley in 1885 (Cawte, p. 201. A record of not dissimilar dancing from Shrewsbury in 1878–1879 makes no mention of black faces (Cawte, p. 203).

Blacking up seems to have happened in Aston in Clun in the early part of the 20th century, down to about 1938, where it seems also to be referred to as ‘niggering’; something similar is reported around the same time period in Onibury (Cawte, p. 203). [See further below, the Nutters.] Cawte mentions the visit by Sharp to Brimfield in 1909, when photos were taken, where the faces were

---

1 This can be downloaded via JSTOR at http://www.jstor.org/stable/4521671 (accessed 1 November 2016, but JSTOR is not usually accessible to those without an account or institutional access).

2 Lest anyone comment that this word is regarded as distasteful today, it has to be placed in the context of its time and prevalent language and attitudes. See further below on the Nutters.
A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE ON ‘BLACKING UP’ IN TRADITIONAL DANCE

black and white (Cawte, p. 209).\(^3\) Sharp also refers in the first edition of the Morris Book vol I to black faces in White Ladies Aston (Cawte, p. 205). Blackened faces are also noted in Evesham at some point in the period 1875–1895, and some blacked dancers in Bromsberrow Heath (Cawte, p. 206).

From Cawte’s appendix on pp 209–210, we see that there is evidence of blacking at Bridgnorth in the 1880s to the 1950s, Dawley from the 1890s to 1929, Ludlow (1920s), and Madeley Wood (1890s).

Cawte’s conclusions contain the following important statement from his time when he was collecting his material. A dancer said to him ‘They blacked their faces: “you’re not a morris dancer without a black face,” one old man told me’ (p. 206).\(^4\) He further comments how the black faces of the Welsh Border Morris distinguish them from other traditions (p. 207). However, Cawte does not further commit himself on the origin of the blacking up process (see further below, the Nutters).

2. Molly


This booklet serves as perhaps the principal research on Molly, and is an offshoot of the author’s 1997 PhD which largely concerned the Seven Champions. The blackface element is principally covered on pp 11–14, especially in the section entitled ‘Black-face and transvestism’. Bradtke does not consider any other options for the blacking other than disguise, forthrightly put, ‘In the case of Molly dancers, black-face was a form of disguise’ (p. 12). She argues this on the basis of a mix of the evidence for rioters and unruly types blacking up to avoid being recognised and also by the assumption of female attire, the latter as women were less likely to be prosecuted than men for being unruly;\(^6\) both are of course closely associated with Molly. It is interesting that in her summary tables of evidence on pp 27–38 (much from the records of luminaries from Cambridge MM such as Wortley, Peck and Needham), while blacking up is sometimes specifically noted, it is frequently not specifically mentioned in the sources (which may only mean that the collectors took it as a given).

3. The Britannia Coconut Dancers of Bacup (‘the Nutters’)

Very different in dance are the Nutters.\(^7\) As a tradition which now is apparently unique, they have been studied in more depth than many sides, and examining them brings out several interesting perspectives, including that of blacking up. Theresa Buckland has probably looked at them from the academic perspective more than anyone else. Two articles by her particularly seem relevant, and I will here concentrate on how the blacking up might relate to other practices.

---

\(^3\) Roy Dommett’s notes on the Morris Ring web site say they had their ‘faces blacked with white painted patches’ (http://themorrisring.org/tradition/brimfield, accessed 1 November 2016).

\(^4\) It is not clear as I write this when Cawte did his field research on these dances. No doubt others will know the answer to this, or indeed much more about him. A quick Internet search has not revealed anything to me.

\(^5\) Not apparently available on the Internet to download.

\(^6\) On pp 11–12 she suggests that as women in the late Mediaeval period and later were punished less often as they were seen as ‘naturally unruly’ and ‘prone to emotional outbursts’!

\(^7\) http://www.coconutters.co.uk/history.html, accessed 2 November 2016.

This article looks at the Nutters’ dances, other examples of the tradition, and, of particular relevance here, the involvement of blacking up in the area, ‘niggering’ as it was known (see caveat in note above). Clearly the Nutters are the only survival of a small number of other groups in this area, several of which were laid low by the carnage of WW1.

The key section for us in this article is that entitled ‘Coconut Dancing and Niggering’ (pp 7–9). Blackened faces seem certainly to have been present in the dances of the Rossendale area in the 19th century (Buckland, p. 6), although I cannot pinpoint the earliest clear attestation in the article. Blacking up is generally attributed by the Nutters themselves for the past 80 or so years to the practice of disguising themselves. This can have multiple purposes—it is known well beyond the 19th century as a way of trying to avoid identification and prosecution when nefarious activity was planned (see Molly above), but it can also help anonymise people, like dancers, doing something far removed from their everyday activity. It was Cecil Sharp’s adoption around 1911 of this explanation for blacking up in all traditional contexts that seems to have found its way via the EFDSS as the ‘official’ explanation. Yet Buckland makes the point that in the course of the earlier 19th century, the tradition of nigger minstrels caught on in the UK, and that this had at least an influence on the practice of niggering by which young lads with blackened faces went around the streets around Easter NOT linked with dancing. But the theatrical popularity of minstrel shows with their singing and dancing could perhaps have had an influence on dance traditions. Associating the Nutters’ dance with Morris, with all the possibility of the latter being a corruption of ‘Moorish’, with its non-white associations, may have confused the origins even more.

Thus the possibility cannot be excluded that the blacking up in Bacup does have its origins in the minstrel shows of the 19th century. Buckland suggests (p. 9) that the fact that the Nutters used to blacken their hands as well as faces until the 1950s might favour this interpretation.

T.J. Buckland, “‘T’Owd Pagan Dance”: Ritual, Enchantment, and an Enduring Intellectual Paradigm’, *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* Vols. 11 No. 4 and 12 No. 1, 11 415–452

This article focuses on how dances may be unwittingly or deliberately turned into something that they were never via the human desire for tradition and mystery, and how the understanding of these dances may be varied over the years and from their origin, if that can be ascertained (my summary). The Nutters feature heavily in this as her main example, and the article covers a lot of the same ground as the previous one, although perhaps from a more anthropological perspective. She does point out that no records exist specifically to link the Nutters with minstrelsy. However, she does acknowledge how interpretations would change over time, and might unconsciously try and move the traditions in a different direction—such as in this case, the link with Moorish and Morris might put the origins of the Nutters away from one in which modern eyes might see an element of racism. Pp 440–441 are important in this. The rest of the article is well worth a read but applies more generally than just to blacked-up faces.

---

9 In fact, without drawing it further, Buckland on p. 8 suggests this music hall fad could have influenced the blacking of the Welsh Borders, referring to an article by G. Ashman in *Traditional Dance* vol 5, which I have as yet been unable to locate.
10 I am not presently sure of an internet source for this.
4. The changing perceptions of folk dancing in a country where there are more black people than ever before

This of course brings us to the whole unpleasant issue that sparked off the need for this summary. A 287 page MPhil thesis from 2013 needs to be brought into play.


I have not the time, space or will to summarise this whole lengthy work, so I will just select key sections. It all needs to be read through, but chapters 4 to 7 are perhaps the most relevant to the current enquiry. I will mention parts briefly of these.

Chapter 4: Historical References to Blackened Faces in England

This is a survey of the data. For Border, most of the same material as noted by Cawte, and the Nutters, as in Buckland; it also encompasses Molly (mostly from Bradtke) and Mumming, and of course all sorts of other traditional customs where there is evidence for blackened faces, including a brief word on the old chestnut of whether ‘Morris’ is at all related to ‘Moorish’. I do not think that there is any point in this short document of listing all of the material, the original thesis being so readily available.

Chapter 5: Current Practice

Pretty much a survey of what goes on now, most of which will be well known to readers.

Chapter 6: Reactions, Reasons and Responses

Reactions include those of the authorities, the dancers and the spectators, both black and white. Again these are mostly the ones of which we are aware; the authorities’ legal reactions to events associated with the ‘Darkie Day’/ ‘Mummers’ Day’ in Padstow are interesting (pp 202–206).

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

This is most definitely worth a read, even if one reads nothing else. It makes it clear that no one explanation fits all the ‘facts’ such as they are, although she acknowledges the prevalence of the disguising theory today: ‘Even if it was never part of, or the whole reason for, the original mummers, Molly dancers and Border Morris men blackening their features - and I fear it is too late ever to discover the truth of this - it is the reason now current amongst performers and the one provided to the general public.’ (p. 260). As has been evident from the other readings examined above, there are clearly cases where imitation of blacks is behind it, but there are many that are not so straightforward, and the disguise option still remains a valid possibility.

5. Conclusion

The situation is complex, both in the nature of the data, and in relation to the modern response to blacking up, which obviously primarily comes from those who are ignorant of the traditional responses. The fact is, however, that whatever the real reason for the practice of blackface (which may in itself have become part of the folklore [see Bater quote in italics above]), the response of the viewer is initially unaffected by it, and it is that response that may give rise to future problems.

I am not qualified as to comment on the legal aspects today of the issue, although I would draw attention again to the Padstow enquiry above. Whether there are more legal sources available since 2013 I do not know—and I am not privy to any legal advice being obtained by the Fed or the Open.

Nigel Strudwick
November 2016