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GOMBAY, A FESTAL RITE OF BERMUDIAN NEGROES.

THE colored population of Bermuda have, in general, attained a higher stage of development and made greater progress in civilization than their kindred in the Southern United States. This is probably due in part to close contact (not amalgamation) with their Anglo-Saxon masters on these isolated islands, and in part to the admixture of Indian blood in their ancestors. Between the years 1630 and 1660 many negro and Indian slaves were brought into the British colony; the negroes from Africa and the West Indies, and a large number of redskins from Massachusetts, prisoners taken in the Pequot and King Philip wars. Many of the colored people show in their physiognomy the influence of the Indian type. Moreover, slavery was abolished in 1834, Bermuda being the first colony to advocate immediate rather than gradual emancipation; but the importation of negroes from Africa had ceased long before, so the type resulting from the mixed races continued to dominate. The faces of many of the dark-skinned natives are really fine, their lips being thinner, noses sharper, cheek-bones less obtrusive, and their facial angle larger than those of most negroes in the Southern States. They are polite in their conduct; they dress as well as any one in the same station in life, and in better taste than many of their white friends; they are much interested in education, having separate schools; they are deeply religious; and they are much attached to their own secret and benevolent societies. Though as improvident and lazy as elsewhere in a warm clime, squalor and beggary are almost unknown, thanks to the bounteous gifts of Nature in these semi-tropical islands. Rich and poor alike reside in houses built of the same material, — coral rock cut into convenient blocks and coated with an intensely white wash of lime. The negro huts are smaller than others, but cleanliness prevails, and they may be said to dwell in "marble halls."

Their English dialect is rather peculiar; they clip short their words, and give the vowels an unfamiliar quality, — at least to my ears. My stay in Bermuda was too limited to collect any vocabulary, but a resident gave me a noteworthy expression used by an old woman to whom a variety of pretty things (bric-a-brac) had been shown; the woman exclaimed, "What a moriety of eyesighties!" (Things pleasing to the eyesight.)

The singular custom called *Gombay* maintained by the negroes is supposed to be the survival of an ancient African rite, obviously highly modified by their civilized environment. The gombay parade is usually held on Christmas Eve, between 11 P. M. and 2 A. M.; per-

haps it has been transferred to the holiday season because greater leisure is enjoyed, and it is a time of general merrymaking. At this time groups of men and boys (women seldom take part) parade about the country, going from house to house singing, dancing, and playing on rude musical instruments, among which the triangle and tambourine are prominent, penny whistles and concertinas being also called to their aid. The men wear their ordinary garments, but are masked, bearing on their heads the heads and horns of hideous-looking beasts (formidable only to an uncultured mind), as well as beautifully made imitations of houses and ships, both lighted by candles. The houses are known as gombay houses, and are large enough to admit the head of the bearer inserted through a hole below, the building resting on his shoulders; these are more common than the ships, which are full-rigged. All are carefully constructed of wood, cardboard, colored papers, string, etc. As the men approach the houses, the group, sometimes twenty in number, dance a breakdown, and shout:—

Gombay, ra-lay
Gombay, ra-lay.

After singing a while they claim small gratuities and pass along.

The significance of the word "gombay," pronounced gum-bay, not accented, I have not ascertained.

The ceremonies are now less common and elaborate than formerly, though very recently a revival seems to have sprung up. On questioning some negroes about gombay they seemed to be ashamed of their connection with the rite, and much difficulty was met in attempts to secure the songs. It is hard to determine which of several versions are the oldest and original, and to distinguish the genuine from the factitious. Numbers I. and II. were written out by a colored boy, and are supposed to be authentic. Number I. is certainly very primitive, lacking rhythm. Numbers VII. and VIII. are possibly partly due to the imagination of my informant, a bright colored man, whose memory was quite dormant until a silver coin roused it suddenly into activity. There is a general family likeness to the others, which were from different sources, but the allusion to a "ribber" (in No. VII.), a feature entirely lacking in the physical geography of Bermuda, is suspicious, and the reference to a "waterfall" shows its modern origin. A facility for extemporizing makes it difficult to prove the connection of a given song with the gombay rite. About twenty-five years ago an old negro rejoicing in the soubriquet of "Blind Isaac" used to go about the islands from house to house in quest of copper coins, and singing songs of his own composition; to him are attributed some of the characteristic verses now current among the negroes.

During the years 1862-64, when exciting and profitable ventures in blockade-running made the port of St. George a scene of great activity, Blind Isaac used to sing about a vessel that was wrecked on the south shore : —

The Mary Celeste she runned ashore,
She *did*, she *did*,

(emphasizing the sentiment by striking the ground at each *did* with a thick stick,)

She 'll never run the block no more,
No more, no more !

I.

Pretty girls,
I long to see you come down
With the money in your pocket,
Come down.

CHORUS.

Away, away, away !
I long to see you come down.

You pretty girls, come down,
Your curly hairs, come down. Chorus.

You bunch roses, come down,
You pretty little dimples come down. Chorus.

Ladies give me money for dancing,
Ladies give me money all,
O ring, O ring, O ring O
And let us go.

No. II. is another version of the above, taken down from colored servants by a resident : —

II.

Pretty yaller girls, come down,
Bunch of roses, come down,
I long to see you come down,
A la, a la, a la,
I long to see you come down.

Pretty ladies, come down,
Money in your pockets, come down,
Bunch of roses, come down,
Hurrah, urrah, urrah,
I long to see you come down.

Knotted-headed girls come down,
I long to see you come down,
A la, a la, a la,
I long to see you come down.

III.

Nancy Green she dress so fine,
Simon Taylor, high-lo,
She dress herself in a pumpkin vine,
Simon Taylor, high-lo.

Miss Green she so fine,
Simon Taylor, high-lo,
She thought one night she was dying,
Simon Taylor, high-lo,
And high-low, away we go,
Simon Taylor, high-lo,
High-lo, and away we go,
Simon Taylor, high-lo.

IV.

I caught that ship yesterday morning,
Simon Taylor, high-lo,
I took her about four o'clock in the morning
Simon Taylor, high-lo.

Probably only a fragment.

V.

Ladies give me money for lingo ;
Ladies give me money for all,
Lingo, for lingo, lingo, lingo.
Ladies give me money for dancing ;
Ladies give me money for all,
Lingo, lingo, for lingo, lingo.

VI.

Paget ¹ girls are pretty girls,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo ;
Warwick ¹ girls, ugly girls,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.
Warwick girls got no hairs,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.
Take a bit of wool and stick it dere,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo !

VII.

Oh turn that house upside down,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.
Hy-lo, and away we go,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.
I 'm gwine down de ribber to get some shads,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.
Mamie, mamie, give me some bread,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.

¹ Paget and Warwick are parishes of Bermuda. Somerset, named in VII., is another. These are changed to suit the prejudices of the singers.

O good Lord, I 'm almost dead,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.
Somerset girl ain't got no hair,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.
Take a bit of wool and stick it dere,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.
And that 's what they call a waterfall,
Simon Taylor, hy-lo.

VIII.

Oh stop that car, don't you start,
Fire down below.
Oh stop that car, don't you start,
Fire down below.
O Captain Hory, will you listen to my story,
Dere 's a fire down below.
O woodman, hold that horse's head,
Dere 's a fire down below.
Ole massa's head is burning red,
Dere 's a fire down below.
O Doctor Lye, I 'm gwine to die,
Dere 's a fire down below.
O my Lord, I 've lost my eye,
Dere 's a fire down below.

I am under obligations to Miss Bessie Gray, Clermont, for information, and especially for taking down some of the gombay songs.

H. Carrington Bolton.