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Mummers and Real Strangers: The Effect of Diminished Isolation on Newfoundland Christmas House Visiting

CRAIG T. PALMER

THE TWELVE DAYS OF Christmas mark a distinct and important time in Newfoundland rural communities.¹ Many of the normal winter activities cease and are replaced with intense social visiting which takes two basic forms. The first is the undisguised house visit, in which "crowds" of men,² ranging from three to thirty members, visit many of the houses in the community. At each house, the men are served a drink of alcohol (rum, whiskey, beer or moonshine). The second form of visiting is known as mumming, mummering, or janneying (Widdowson, "Mummering and Janneying") and is distinguished by the visitors wearing elaborate disguises designed to obscure their identity. Mummers usually travel from house to house in groups of two to ten, with children and adults of both sexes participating (Chiaramonte). The residents of the house attempt to guess the identity of the visiting mummers, who will usually unmask if their identity is correctly determined. Adult mummers, especially the males, are then usually offered a drink of alcohol by the host of the house.

Although Sider has argued that mumming was not commonly practiced in Newfoundland until the rise of the family fishery around 1840, there is historical evidence of mumming in Newfoundland at least as early as 1819 (Anspach; Byrne; Story and Halpert; Halpert), with some elements of mumming reported as early as 1583 (Story 167). Very similar Christmas traditions were also practiced in Britain by the ancestors of current Newfoundland residents for an undetermined number of generations (Lovelace). This tradition continued in Newfoundland until mumming, especially mumming by adults, experienced a dramatic decline in Newfoundland during the late 1950s and 1960s.

Although specific explanations have approached mumming from such divergent theoretical perspectives as Marxism (Sider; Clark), culture and personality (Firestone, "Mummers and Strangers"), cognition (Faris), symbolic interactionism (Firestone, "Christmas Mumming"), social organization (Chiaramonte), comparative semiotics (Handelman), and nativistic revitalization movements (Pocius), there are some major areas of agreement. The first is that mumming and undisguised Christmas house visiting are intensely social events which have a positive effect on the social relationships of the people who participate. Chiaramonte states that both mumming and undisguised house visiting are times when "alienations between households and men are put aside" and "the community reaffirms its sense of unity" (81). Szwed states that these events involve the "renewal and affirmation of social ties" (114). (See also the writings of Firestone, Sider, and Faris.)

There is also general agreement about some of the reasons Christmas visiting has this positive social effect. First, inclusion in a visiting group reinforces social allegiances, although normal groupings may be intentionally mixed during mumming to help avoid identification. Simply being visited also reinforces the individual's and family's social ties to the visitors. Further, the visits are "signs of open friendship" during which "hospitality and generosity are strikingly displayed" through the giving of alcoholic drinks and sometimes food (Szwed 109). This promotes further visiting and sharing during the rest of the year. Szwed also states that "although it is obvious that mummers go to some lengths to disguise their identities . . . [it] is felt that there is no fun involved when there is complete failure at identification" (111). This may be because the act of being identified despite having one's face, body shape, and voice disguised creates a situation where the mummer "is aware that he is familiar enough to his identifiers to be recognized" (114). Thus mumming draws attention to the intimate knowledge individuals have about each other and, hence, to their long history of cooperative association.

There is also agreement that mumming typically involves apparently aggressive, threatening, and hostile behaviors. The behavior involved in visits by mummers has been described as "rough" (Halpert), "rowdy" (Pocius), and "aggressive" (Szwed). These "deviant events" (Szwed 117) are also seen as crucial to the positive social effect of mumming. The most popular explanation of this paradox is that mumming allows both the "cathartic expression of repressed motives" (Szwed 117) and the "displacement" of such emotions from the family and community to the mummers (Firestone).

Although I agree that the threatening, hostile, and aggressive aspects of mumming contribute to the promotion of social relationships, I feel previous explanations of how this occurs fail to address one crucial aspect of the behavior involved in mumming. This is the fact that the aggression and hostility exhibited is not real — it is only "threatening *play*" (Handelman 248; my

emphasis). The humorous, unserious nature of mumming is always acknowledged, but previous explanations have assumed that the "overtly festive" (Firestone, "Mummers and Strangers" 63) atmosphere of mumming does not change the fundamental nature of the aggressive and hostile behavior which takes place. However, numerous studies have demonstrated that there is a clear difference between real aggression and "playful fighting" (Boulton). Indeed, playful aggressive behaviors influence other people in ways often diametrically opposed to the influence of serious aggressive behaviors (Alexander). This is certainly true during mumming. In fact, I suggest that it is the recognition of the difference between actual aggression and playful aggressive-like behavior that promotes trusting cooperative relationships between those participating in mumming.

Instead of "expressing" or "displacing" real hostility, I suggest that the behavior involved in mumming is best seen as communication which influences the behavior of others. When participants in mumming respond to the aggressive-like behaviors of others without the fear or retaliatory violence with which they would react to real aggression, they are communicating that they trust the aggressors to not engage in real aggression. Szwed states that "a mummer can get quite 'nasty' or 'mean' and yet be forgiven as he is considered to be just 'actin' like a mummer should" (113). I suggest that the real key to the "forgiveness" of apparently violent and aggressive behavior during mumming is the understanding that the apparent aggressors are "just 'actin'," period.

This is not to say that this communication is always successful. When there are real hostilities between individuals participating in ritualistic house visiting, and/or when the aggressive-like behaviors go too far (Williams; Alexander), the "mock" aspects of the aggressive behavior may be intentionally ignored and the aggressive-like behavior may promote the eruption of real hostility and violence. The important point is that such real anger and violence are seen as completely distinct from the playful violence traditionally associated with mumming. In addition to the general understanding that the behavior of mummers should not be taken seriously, this distinction between play and the real thing is also maintained by certain rules which restrict the behavior of mummers. Although mummers are claimed to be "uninhibited" and "unpredictable," they are not completely free to act in whatever manner they wish. For example, Firestone describes their behavior as "*somewhat* unpredictable" ("Mummers and Strangers" 63, my emphasis). Faris also quotes informants as stating that when mummers visit "anything can happen," but he goes on to say that "the role deviation sanctioned by the 'false face' is *practically* unlimited" (132, my emphasis). Even though mummers and their hosts are often intoxicated, this still only allows them "to be as uninhibited *as drinking norms permit*" (Chiaramonte 84, my emphasis).

The difference between play and the real thing is also crucial to

understanding the sexuality which “permeates” Christmas house visiting in general, and mumming in particular (Pocius 69). The disguises of mummers often involve dressing like the opposite sex, with men often wearing costumes featuring exaggerated breasts and buttocks. “Ribald” songs are often sung by the crowds of men, both when they travel from house to house (Chiaramonte 82) and within the homes. Most importantly, physical contact of a sexual nature occurs during visits which would not be tolerated during other times of the year. Previous explanations have described this sexual behavior as just part of the “license” given to people during Christmas. A closer examination reveals that this sexual activity, like the aggression previously described, is play instead of the real thing, and that this distinction is maintained through both a general understanding and specific rules of conduct.

Pocius indicates the general understanding that the sexual behavior which takes place during mumming is not to be taken seriously when he refers to “the air of *mock* sexuality that permeates much of the mumming *game*” (Pocius 69, my emphasis). Lovelace points out that there are also limits to the types of playful sexual behavior allowed: “a *certain degree* of sexual play goes on under cover of the special freedom given to mummers” (276, my emphasis). The fact that the sexual behavior is play instead of the real thing is also indicated by the response of people to the behavior. For example, Chiaramonte describes an incident where “every now and then one of the men pulled her [the wife of the host] out onto the floor amidst her *laughter* and protest and gave her a swing” (87, my emphasis). Although Faris emphasizes the “uninhibited” behavior associated with mumming, his description reveals both the understanding that this sexual behavior is only play, and that this play is subject to specific limits:

The behaviour of mummers today is quite uninhibited. I witnessed a mummer (a female disguised in male clothing) engage in mock copulation with one hostess. The woman's reaction was slight embarrassment and some protest, but also laughter, and this appeared to be a consistent reaction to the general frolic in which the mummers engage. In another instance, a mummer (again a female) grabbed a married woman, visiting at the house when the mummers arrived, and danced with her into the prohibited ‘inner part’ of the house. The ‘inner part’ is the parlour, living room, and bedrooms, and it is an absolute breach of conduct to go into this section of the house without specifically being invited by the householders.

Although undisguised females are largely the ‘victims’ of the mummers’ antics, the mummers themselves are by no means the only ones allowed licence. In determining the identity of mummers, the hosts are sometimes allowed to explore with their hands the upper torso, head, and face of mummers in an effort to ‘find them out.’ Undisguised men, for example, often single out an obviously female mummer and proceed to dance a few steps with her, then ‘feel her up.’ It is said that this ‘feeling up’ must always be ‘above the waist.’ (132)

Just as the “mock violence” of mumming provides an opportunity to communicate trust that real violence will not occur between the participants, the “mock sexuality” of mumming communicates trust that the participants will not attempt real sexual transgressions. The significance of the sexual behavior is not in the amount that is allowed, but in the trust that real sexual transgressions will not take place. “Feeling up” of women would not be tolerated in everyday contexts because it would be too sexually threatening. It is the understanding of both the playful nature of mumming in general, and the rules limiting the extent of much of this contact (which is usually of only short duration, as indicated by their descriptions as pinches, prods and pokes), which makes such contact tolerated and “safe” during mumming. Interestingly, while Faris notes that men are only allowed to touch women above the waist, Williams reports some “extreme” instances of women grabbing the groins of men (213-4). As one male informant stated, “Yes boy, there’s a lot of sexual joking-around, by the women especially. But there’s a world of difference between jokes and the real thing!”

Chiaromonte observes, “mumming involves people in social relationships which while differing from normal behaviour are nevertheless influenced by it. Indeed, normal relationships determine . . . the attitude of mummers to those whom they visit” (82). The importance of maintaining the trust that the sexual and aggressive behavior is only play instead of the real thing is reflected in the fact that the amount of sexual and aggressive behavior of mummers “is to a very large extent governed by how well they know the members of the host group” (Williams 214). For example, the risqué versions of Christmas carols sung in other homes are replaced by the traditional non-sexual lyrics in homes of people who are not well known.

Following the appearance of Firestone’s essay “Mummers and Strangers in Northern Newfoundland” (1969), much attention has been given to the similarities between mummers and strangers. The claimed similarities include the fact that both mummers and strangers are feared, or at least produce anxiety, and are used to frighten children (Firestone, “Christmas Mumming” 96-7). Both mummers and strangers are also described as “black” or “dark,” terms with evil connotations and associated with the Devil, and both are distinguished from friends and neighbors by their practice of knocking when entering houses (but see Szwed; Williams). Hence, mummers and strangers have been claimed to be equivalents in terms of both their cognitive symbolism (Faris) and social function. Firestone even states that “in becoming mummers people temporarily make themselves strangers in their own society” (“Mummers and Strangers” 75).

There is, however, a fundamental and obvious distinction between mummers and strangers obscured in this metaphorical overstatement — the simple fact that traditionally mummers were not really strangers, they were friends and neighbors. Although this fact is acknowledged, the importance of

this distinction, like the importance of the distinction between mock aggression or sex and the real thing, is largely overlooked or underemphasized in analyses of mumming. For example, Firestone states that “even though it is known that janneys are, in fact, not strangers but members of one’s own or adjacent communities, they are feared because they have temporarily shed their identities, and so *“one might just as well be interacting with strangers”* (“Mummers and Strangers” 72, my emphasis). The inaccuracy of this statement is crucial to an understanding of the effect of decreased isolation on the practice of mumming.

Although the decline in mumming, especially mumming by adults, in the late 1950s and 1960s may be related to the decline in the family fishery (Sider) and the presence of expensive carpeting in homes (Pocius 77), it is also attributed to the decreased isolation of most Newfoundland outports. Szwed states “the fact that in Ross adult interest in mumming is waning . . . is only another sign of the village’s gradual merge with modern society” (118). In his paper “Christmas Mumming and Symbolic Interactionism” (1978), Firestone elaborates on this connection by stating that in the Strait of Belle Isle at the time of his fieldwork in the late 1960s

mumming was carried out largely by children, but it had, up to a few years before, been very much an adult pastime. The community at the time of my work had been but recently connected by road to the Southern part of the island, thus diminishing isolation, particularly during the long winter periods when ice blocked access by sea. (96)

I suggest that there is indeed a direct relation between the decline in mumming and the decrease in isolation, and that this connection resulted from the fact that (to quote Firestone again)

strangers, though treated with great kindness, were causes of some apprehension, *particularly with the opening of the road*. It was feared that such people, with no commitment to local society, could take advantage of the road to come in and do mischief. (96, emphasis added)

In his 1969 essay, Firestone also states that

people say that the reason that there was so little crime in the past was that there was almost no one around who was not a native, and you couldn’t hope to get away with anything because it would soon be obvious who had done the deed. Now, they say, people can come in from anywhere on the road and you have no idea who they are, where they are from, or what they might be up to. They could come in, commit a crime, and then drive off. (71)

Such talk is still common along the Newfoundland side of the Strait of Belle Isle, and the possibility of unknown outsiders being in the community, even during winter which had previously been a time of nearly complete isolation, significantly altered the very nature of mumming. Sider states that

mumming “hovers at times on the edge of the far too fearful . . . [but then] it slithers from the fearful to the jocular” (*Culture and Class* 76). Indeed, mumming traditionally drew attention to the “potential for evil hidden within the self of everyman” (Handelman 258-9), and then communicated that this evil was under control — so under control that it could be safely joked about. This communication depended, however, on participants being sure that the disguised figures threatening violent and sexual acts were really one’s friends and neighbors. The end of isolation meant the possibility that the mummers in one’s home were *real strangers*, and this possibility transformed trust into fear.

The potential of *real danger* now present in mumming has had several effects on the practice. In many communities mumming became infrequent or even ceased, being replaced by public dances and parties (Williams 215), or simply drinking at the local “club.” Although this trend is lamented by some, women are often quite happy about it, both because they no longer have to clean up after mummers and because it is “safer.” The relation between private danger and public safety in the decline of mumming can be seen in Williams’ statement that “my wife sums it [the decline in mumming] up: ‘It’s just gone out of style, that’s all; *people won’t let ‘em in* and there’s always some society having their times’” (215, emphasis added).

The late 1980s, however, saw a nostalgic and nativistic revitalization of mumming in Newfoundland (Pocius), and this has contributed to an increase in its practice in some rural communities. Yet even in the communities in which it has continued, or been revitalized, mumming has been transformed by fear. This is reflected in the fact that mumming often takes place at the public dances or parties, instead of in private homes (Pocius). Women are not only more likely to lock their doors during Christmas and to not admit mummers, many now simply refuse to be home alone during this period. Women are also on the “lookout for strange mummers” in their communities, and any sighting of a group of mummers quickly initiates a series of phone calls to attempt to determine their identity. The reasons for these changes in mumming are summed up by one woman who reported enjoying mumming in the past, but stated

Now you don’t know who might be coming in disguised, they might really be strangers and strangers could do anything, you know, and me being a woman and all. No, I don’t like mumming one bit, not anymore I don’t. That’s one tradition that should just die.

For many people, particularly women, the difference between mummers and real strangers makes all the difference in the world.

The apprehension about strangers in outport Newfoundland is usually attributed to the practice of using traditional stories about strangers, symbolized by various fantasy figures, such as the “bogeyman,” the “boo-man,” and “Santa Claus,” to scare young children (Firestone, “Mummers and Strangers”;

Widdowson). This generalized fear of strangers had, however, a real origin rooted in the historical isolation of outport communities:

the archetypal stranger figure was that of the 'Runaway,' an outlaw thought to be masked and carrying a handgun. At one time there were actual Runaways: fishermen who had escaped from the French fishing fleet . . . as well as English sailors who had deserted from vessels on patrol. (Firestone, "Christmas Mumming" 96)

Although most of these men were quickly incorporated into local communities (Firestone, "Mummers and Strangers" and "Christmas Mumming"), the potential presence of desperate men with no ties of kinship or friendship to local residents was a real threat. Interestingly, Firestone states that the "Runaway . . . is the fantasy figure of whom children and some adults, *particularly women out berry-picking*, are afraid" ("Mummers and Strangers" 69, my emphasis). The emphasis on "women out berry-picking" suggests that part of the fear of "runaways" concerned the possibility of rape; women berry-picking are recognized as being in a particularly vulnerable situation since this was one of the few times they were isolated from other members of the community.

Mummers, under traditional conditions, were indeed *like* these unknown males who constituted a potential threat of both physical and sexual violence, but mummers were really friends and neighbors who could be trusted. The playful humor of mummers did not just coexist with the hostile and threatening behavior of mummers; it transformed this behavior (except in the case of small children) into non-threatening play. With the end of isolation, people are no longer sure whether or not mummers are *real* strangers. Local residents realize that this increases the possibility of physical and sexual violence, and the likelihood that a visit from mummers may lead to "the far too fearful."

Pocius points out that traditional mumming has been largely replaced with a nostalgic, nativistic image that ignores the threatening and aggressive aspects of mumming and, thus, "leaves out all that was negative about the custom" (77). I suggest that the "negative aspects" of mumming were actually quite positive because, by being understood to be play instead of the real thing, they confirmed that a person could trust the people they interacted with during everyday life. Hence, it is the new sanitized version of mumming that has a negative aspect — its implication that people can no longer trust one another.

Notes

¹The following descriptions of mumming and related behavior are based on both published work and original research. Where no citation is provided, the observations come from my own fieldwork on the Newfoundland side of the Strait of Belle Isle between May, 1990, and May, 1992. The research was funded by a postdoctoral

fellowship from the Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland (ISER).

²Some unmarried women in their twenties are now beginning to form their own "crowds" and engage in undisguised house visiting on Christmas night.

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