



DRESSING UP THE ISLANDS: **The Story Behind the National Costume**

Story by David Bowen, Director of Culture, Turks & Caicos Department of Culture

One of the very first tasks that I assigned myself, as the Tourist Board's Cultural Officer, was to work on getting a national costume recognized. Throughout my travels and many years abroad, I have seen a number of countries displaying their national costumes during national holidays, celebrations and cultural shows. When I moved back home to the Turks & Caicos in the mid 1990s, I worked at Beaches Resort as Entertainment Manager, and during that time I had to use the Jamaican national costume (due to a lack of our own), for some of my productions and group functions where a "Native Island look" was required.

The Jamaican national dress is called the Bandana. It is quite beautiful and when I later learnt the meaning and history behind its design, pattern and colors, I was very impressed. That made me curious as to why Turks & Caicos did not have a national dress of our own, since we did have somewhat of an interesting and colorful past including English Loyalists, Bermudian salt rakers and African-American and African slaves.

THE START OF AN IDEA

In August 2001, the Tourist Board asked me to assist a group of students who were representing the Turks & Caicos in a youth conference being held in Guyana. As part of the conference, each group of students had to perform something highlighting their native culture. With the help of Youth Director Craig Archibold as musical director, I choreographed and directed a ten-minute medley of folk songs and dances for the group to perform. During a rehearsal, I asked the students what type of costume was being worn for the performance and was told, "A T-shirt and jeans for the boys and a skirt and T-shirt for the girls." That response really turned my head. Here we were representing the country and culture on the international stage and no thought was given to the type of truly native costume our group would be displaying.

With haste I put together an "Island Look" of loose pants, straw hats and colorful print shirts from my personal assortment of costumes, but in the end the group had to have costumes made in Guyana. Despite this, the Turks & Caicos group actually won First Prize for Best Cultural Presentation -- quite a feat considering the rich cultural heritage of the other Caribbean nations attending -- and I always felt it would have left a more lasting impression if our group were dressed in a national costume.

Shortly after signing on with the Tourist Board a few weeks later, I put the national costume on top of my "Things to Do" list. I am proud to say that eight months later, on June 1, 2002, the National Dress made its debut in the nation's capital of Grand Turk during the Queen's Golden Jubilee Celebration. What follows is the story behind the development of the Turks & Caicos National Dress.

AN IDEA SHARED BY MANY

Over the years, there have been many designs, dresses and costumes presented in cultural shows, parades, pageants, international performances and Tourist Board functions with the good intention of displaying and representing our country. Some were African in style and design; some had a typical generic Caribbean flair while others were made to look like the symbols of what was felt at the time to represent our heritage and culture. There were some fantastic costumes made to resemble the Turks Head Cactus, the Conch Shell, the Hibiscus Flower and even a Lobster, but nothing stuck.

In 1994, Valerie Forbin, then the Tourist Board's Information Officer (now the Assistant Director of Cultural Development) and Stanley Astwood began a campaign to introduce a number of national symbols and among the items on their list was a quest for a national dress. The idea at the time



was to have a design somewhat like a costume used by the Turks & Caicos Cultural Group under the direction of Joe Robinson. (A photograph can be seen on the jacket of the record album "Bonefish Bitin'," a recording of folk songs made by the group.) Unfortunately, red tape and a lack of interest put the project on the back burner until September, 2001 when Mrs.

Forbin gave a copy of her national symbol proposal to me when she discovered that I was very interested and sincere in my quest to research and help develop a national dress for Turks & Caicos Islanders.

The problem was, of course, deciding what kind of design would accurately represent our nation and its unique cultural heritage. A national dress should reflect a country's history and culture and at the same time, represent the various aspects of its diverse population, industry, beauty and character.

With 40 islands and cays, several different industries and most of our settlements separated by water, trying to define our cultural heritage in a single costume presented a huge challenge. The natives on each of the six inhabited islands (Grand Turk, Salt Cay, South Caicos, Middle Caicos, North Caicos and Providenciales) are known to be very patriotic to their island home, so any design that leaned too much towards one island or another would truly upset the others. It would be a tricky situation to please all and at the same time honestly represent the nation as a whole. Clear thinking and an impartial viewpoint were needed . . . and let's not forget, lots of luck!

THE BEGINNING

The task began at the library, researching and studying the national costumes of the world for background information on their history and reasons for the various styles, colors and designs. Some were very simple, like the national dress of Israel, while others were flamboyant and spectacular, like the costume of Thailand, but in the end one thing became very clear: the vast majority of the designs were based on what the working people wore during the developing stages of their country. What was truly fascinating was that almost every part of the costumes had meaning and reflected important aspects of the culture, people and history.

Armed with this information, the next stop was the Turks & Caicos National Museum, where Brian Riggs and Nigel Sadler provided photographs, sketches and written descriptions on the background, work clothes and lifestyle of the salt rakers, farmers, fishermen and plantation slaves who lived and worked in the Islands. Senior citizens such as James Dean, Alton Higgs, Mary Quelch, Stanley Fulford, Constance Hall, Mr. & Mrs. Walter Malcolm and Mr. & Mrs. Donald Hamilton, just to name a few, were also consulted since they were able to talk from experience about what was worn and what daily life was like in the early years.

I learnt that our ancestors' dress was basic and practical. Clothes were usually handed down and reused since there was not much wealth in those days. It didn't take long to realize that what they wore represented a simple and humble lifestyle.

WHAT THEY WORE

The ladies' dresses were long and hung around the calf and ankle. They were usually tied, gathered, or hung loose at the waist. The sleeves were both long and short with a modest collar. In the Caicos Islands, sometimes pants were worn under the dresses as protection from mosquitoes and bugs. Materials and fabrics such as cotton, denim, oznerburg cloth, flour bags, khaki, croca sacks, drill, and chambray were all used to make clothes. Headscarfs and handmade wide-brim straw hats, made from the dried leaves of the Silver Palm top, were worn to provide protection from the sun while working in the fields or bagging salt. In the Caicos Islands, both women and men wore slippers made from leaves or grass, but the majority of the people worked barefoot. In later years, "Wompers" -- handmade shoes made from washed-up materials -- came into fashion.

The men wore simple shirts and loose pants, which they rolled up to the calf or knee while they



worked. Belts or a piece of rope kept their pants up. Shirts had both short and long sleeves, which were also rolled up while working.

Handmade straw hats completed the outfit, providing shade from the burning sun on fishing boats and while raking salt in the ponds or picking cotton and sisal on the plantations. On Sundays and special occasions such as weddings, funerals or going "courting," the natives would wear their best outfits. For the women, it was usually a white or colorful print dress with a "church hat" and a pair of leather shoes with a short heel. The men always had a jacket or coat suit (usually black), a white shirt and they always sported a hat.

DECIDING ON A DESIGN

With all this information in mind, I drew a simple picture and armed with this design, I went around getting input and suggestions from co-workers, friends and knowledgeable persons in the community. I received some good and constructive feedback and came to the conclusion that the design was on the mark.

The next problem was that of what kind of material to use. This problem was solved in late January when I noticed that everywhere, cotton trees were in bloom. Cotton is lightweight, cool, and easy to cut and sew and it was also a vibrant industry in these Islands before the boll weevil destroyed the cotton plantations in the late 1700s.

REPRESENTING THE ISLANDS, HERITAGE AND CULTURE

The local population on each of the six inhabited islands is very patriotic to their island home, the national dress would have to somehow represent each island and its subculture equally. Luckily Valerie, then the Tourist Board's Information Officer, had been printing brochures about each island for visiting tourists. To distinguish one from the other she used various colored paper. The idea to color code the islands was a natural, but more research had to be conducted into what color best suited each island.

With the help of Valerie, Tourist Board Public Relations Manager Jackie Mulligan -- with the input of Nigel Sadler, director of the Turks & Caicos Museum -- devised a color scheme and eight colors were chosen with each island's special quality in mind. There were six colors for the main islands and two others for symbols of national pride. It was very important that the color layout and overall design also function as an educational tool, with information and facts about the culture, history and heritage of each island and the nation as a whole.

CHOOSING THE COLORS

RED was chosen to represent the nation's capital, Grand Turk. The color is taken from the red/pink fruit found on the national plant, the Turks Head Cactus. They were once found in abundance on Grand Turk before they were removed to accommodate the salt ponds.

WHITE was chosen to represent Salt Cay. The color came from salt. The salt industry was largely responsible for populating the islands of Salt Cay, Grand Turk and South Caicos.

ORANGE was chosen to represent South and East Caicos. The color comes from the Spiny Lobster and fish and reflects the fishing industry in the "Big South."

TAN was chosen to represent Middle Caicos. The color is taken from the raw material (thatch) that once covered the roofs of the houses. It is also used to make straw hats, baskets and brooms. Middle Caicos is known for the superior quality of native craftwork.

GREEN was chosen to represent North Caicos and Parrot Cay. The color is taken from the fruit trees and other types of trees that flourish in the most fertile of all the islands. North Caicos is also home of Wade's Green Plantation, the most successful of Caicos Islands cotton plantations.

TURQUOISE was chosen to represent the islands of Providenciales, Pine Cay and West Caicos. The color is taken from the beautiful turquoise waters that surround these islands on which our famous Caicos fishing sloops sail. These turquoise waters also contribute to our newest industry, tourism.

PINK was chosen to represent the beautiful conch shell, flamingoes and the numerous uninhabited cays that make up our chain of islands.

YELLOW represents God's glory as the sun shining down on all our beautiful islands and cays. The sun also contributes to our newest industry, tourism.

Finally, it was very important to bring out the individual island pride when folks wore their national dresses. I wanted people to be proud of their island home and also make it easy to recognize and identify which island the individual called home. Using the color scheme, the scarf and sash worn by the women corresponds with the color chosen for their island home. Men display their color as a band on their hats.

THE RULES

(1) Colors must follow a specific pattern. For the women, the first four colors must be laid out in the following order -- Yellow, Red, White and Orange -- and are worn on their sleeves. The remaining four colors in this order -- Tan, Green, Turquoise and Pink -- are worn along the base of their dresses. The men must display the first four colors on the right sleeve and the other four on the left.

(2) Straw hats **MUST** be worn, with the appropriate scarf, sash and hatband. (Footwear optional.)

The National Dress of the Turks & Caicos Islands symbolizes the humble, hard-working life of our ancestors, who raked the salt ponds, toiled in the fields on the various plantations, fished the oceans and harvested conch and sponges on our many islands. Its rainbow of colors boldly highlights our natural beauty and symbolizes the unique characteristics of each of our many islands. It should be worn with pride and dignity, as a statement of our love and respect for this wonderful country, not only by Belongers but by all who call the Turks & Caicos Islands home.

END.