

THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

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Edited by Michael Heaney

Coconut Dances in Lancashire, Mallorca, Provence and on the Nineteenth-century Stage

Peter Bearon

pp. 87-111

Note: The scope of this chapter did not include consideration of any potentially racist aspects of coconut dances, or of the obvious racism in some of the quoted historical sources. Neither the author or the publishers (EFDSS and the HDS) condone any folk dance that could be considered racially offensive through (for example) the use of blackface make-up. Read about how EFDSS is reassessing its historical archives at <https://www.efdss.org/reassessing-our-archives>.



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Peter Bearon

Coconut Dances in Lancashire, Mallorca, Provence and on the Nineteenth-century Stage*

This article started life many years ago when I realized that the tune used by Els Moretons in Mallorca bears a striking similarity to the tune collected by Anne Geddes Gilchrist and known as ‘The Rochdale Coconut Dance’.

In May 2016, I eventually saw a performance by Els Moretons and posted a video of them on the Traditional Customs Facebook page. This led to some discussion as to whether there could be a connection between the coconut dance traditions in Mallorca and Lancashire.

The first part of this article considers the similarities between the Mallorcan and Lancashire dances. The article goes on to consider a third coconut dance tradition from the Provence region of France. It then looks at the many references in newspapers throughout the nineteenth century to coconut (‘cocoa nut’) dances on the stage and in circuses. Finally, it considers the similarities between the tunes mentioned above.

I have drawn extensively on previous work undertaken by both Theresa Buckland and Roy Judge, but hope that there is enough new material and comparative analysis to be of interest.

* The scope of this chapter did not include consideration of any potentially racist aspects of coconut dances, or of the obvious racism in some of the quoted historical sources. Neither the author or the publishers (EFDSS and the HDS) condone any folk dance that could be considered racially offensive through (for example) the use of blackface make-up. Read about how EFDSS is reassessing its historical archives at <https://www.efdss.org/reassessing-our-archives>.

A comparison of Els Moretons, Manacor, Mallorca and the Coconut Dancers in the Rossendale Valley, Lancashire

The two traditions today

Els Moretons

Els Moretons is a dance group from Manacor, the second-largest town in Mallorca, which lies approximately 7 miles inland from the

south-east coast. The present team is comprised of boys of around 12 years old. They perform at the Festes de Sant Domingo. This festival used to occur on 4 August, but support for the custom dwindled as the people of Manacor preferred the coast to the town at this time of year. The last time the Moretons danced on 4 August was in 1963. After a few sporadic occurrences during the 1970s, the Festes de Sant Domingo was moved to May in 1985. Since then the Moretons have danced out every year. The actual date in May is a bit of a moveable feast and is very difficult to ascertain very far in advance.

The main times that Els Moretons perform are the Friday evening and the Saturday daytime of the Festes when they dance through the streets of Manacor accompanied by Giants, Caparrots (Big Heads) and s'Alicorn (a rather strange character with a dog's head that is dressed in a priest's robe. It is smaller than the Giants and larger than the Caparrots and sits in a three-wheeled chair). In 2016 the dates were 21 and 22 May. This was unfortunately after I had left the island as I had been told by two sources that the Festes would take place a week earlier. Fortunately, Els Moretons also danced at the opening celebrations of the Festes de Sant Domingo which in 2016 were during the evening of Tuesday 17 May. This event started with Els Moretons processing into the old convent cloisters (the convent is now used for council offices and a library). They then presented a basket of flowers on a temporary altar. After this there were some long speeches, including one by a Dominican brother who was born in the area, followed by Els Moretons going once through their

dance. After the close of the celebration biscuits and wine were provided for the audience.

My video of this performance can be found as 'Els Moretons, Manacor, Mallorca' on the Vimeo platform and also on the website for this book (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Els Moretons, Manacor, Mallorca (video by Peter Bearon).¹

Rossendale Valley Coconut Dancers

The only current practitioners of the coconut dance in the Rossendale Valley are the Britannia Coconut Dancers. On the Saturday of Easter weekend (commonly, but incorrectly, referred to as Easter Saturday), the Britannia Coconut Dancers start the day at the Old Travellers Rest Inn on the border between Britannia and Whitworth at 9 a.m. Accompanied by members of the Stacksteads Silver Band, they then dance through the streets of the town until they reach the centre of Bacup around lunchtime. At this point they split into two groups for a short while. After this they continue their perambulation finishing at about 7:30 p.m. Details of the tour can be found on the Coconutters' website.²

¹Available at <<http://www.vwml.org/hom>>.

² Britannia Coconut Dancers of Bacup, 'Easter Saturday 2017', <<https://www.coconutters.co.uk/events/easter-saturday/>> [accessed 12 October 2017].

My video of some of the 2016 performance can be found as 'Britannia Coconut Dancers Easter 2016' on the Vimeo platform (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Britannia Coconut Dancers, Bacup (video by Peter Bearon).³

The history of the two traditions

Els Moretons

In the past there have been various hypotheses regarding the origin of the dance. According to the Els Moretons website,⁴ some researchers believed that the dance was tied to the arrival of the Dominican Friars in Manacor in 1576. Another researcher believed that the dance was introduced in the eighteenth century by a monk, Pere Bennassar, first son of a Spanish Dominican convert. There are also researchers who believe that despite there being no documentation prior to the nineteenth century, it is a war dance inspired by the old customs of the Arabs. An old Spanish soldier is supposed to have witnessed a nearly identical dance being performed in a Moroccan camp to celebrate victory after a battle.

The current view of the organizers of Els Moretons is that the dance was created by Dominican Father Pius Caldentey Perrelló in 1854 and that it was created to heighten the papal dogma of the Immacu-

³ Available at <<http://www.vvml.org/hom>>.

⁴ Els Moretons, 'El ball dels Moretons' <<http://www.elsmoretons.com/moreto.html>> [accessed 12 October 2017].

late Conception of Mary.⁵ This still begs the question of where Father Pius got the ideas for the dance.

Rossendale Valley Coconut Dancers

Although the Britannia Coconut Dancers are the only extant team in the Rossendale Valley, there have in the past been other teams. Theresa Buckland has written a number of articles on the tradition.⁶ The longest lived of these teams up to the First World War was the Tunstead Mill Nutters who then handed on their traditions to the Britannia team in the 1920s. The Tunstead Mill team was formed in 1857, although the first mention of this date is in newspapers in 1907 when they celebrated their jubilee.⁷ The date of 1857 is repeated in subsequent years' reports, in 1909 (52nd anniversary),⁸ 1911 (54th anniversary)⁹ and 1914 (this report makes specific mention of the custom being started in Tunstead (Bacup) in 1857).¹⁰

Although there are no specific newspaper references to the Tunstead Mill Nutters prior to 1907, there are other references to Coconut Dancers in the area. The first newspaper reports mentioning Easter-tide coconut dancing by name occur in 1882.¹¹ However, the *Rochdale Observer* includes the following in a report on the Whitworth Wakes in September 1860:¹²

The rush cart, which from time immemorial has graced or disgraced the scene, was this time given up, owing, among other causes, we think to the growing intelligence of the in-

⁵ Antoni Oliver, email to the author, 10 January 2015.

⁶ Theresa Buckland, 'Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts: Exotic Dances on Street and Stage', *Dance Research Journal*, 22.2 (Fall 1990), 1-12; 'The Tunstead Mill Nutters of Rossendale, Lancashire', *Folk Music Journal*, 5.2 (1986), 132-49; "'Th'Owd Pagan Dance": Ritual, Enchantment, and an Enduring Intellectual Paradigm', *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*, 11.4/12.1 (2001/2002), 415-52.

⁷ 'Local Notes', *Burnley Express*, 30 March 1907, p. 7, col. 4 and 'Nut Dancing, Curious Rossendale Custom', *Bury Times*, 3 April 1907, p. 3, col. 3.

⁸ "East Lancashire, Trippers Leave for Seaside", *Lancashire Evening Post*, 10 April 1909, p. 3, col. 4 and 'Rossendale "Cocoanutters"', *Manchester Courier and General Advertiser*, 12 April 1909, p. 10 col. 5.

⁹ "'Nutter's" Carnival, Fifty-Fourth Celebration of a Quaint Custom', *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 17 April 1911, p. 10 col. 6.

¹⁰ 'Rossendale's Easter Dance', *Manchester Evening News*, 13 April 1914, p. 3 col. 5.

¹¹ Buckland, 'Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts', p. 3.

¹² 'Whitworth, The Wakes', *Rochdale Observer*, 15 September 1860, p. 3 col. 2.

habitants. A feeble attempt has [sic] to keep up the boorish custom was made by the youths of Shawforth, and resulted in the construction of a rush cart there, but so uncouth an object that we do not apprehend its reproduction. A fantastic piece of timber framework clothed with heather, slightly ornamented, and mounted on a cart was drawn about Bridgemill, &c., accompanied by a number of its young men, in grotesque attire, as dancers, a portion of whom were begrimed over with some dark compound, and bedixed out in some red trappings, for the purpose of mimicking the antics of South Sea cannibals in a cocoa-nut dance, a parody, forsooth, upon their own intellectual progress.

It is unclear from this whether the cocoa-nut dancers mentioned are from Bridgemill which lies more or less in the centre of Whitworth, or Shawforth which lies between Whitworth and Britannia, approximately 1.5 miles to the north of Whitworth. However, this report shows that coconut dancers were performing on the streets to the south of Bacup in 1860, only three years after the Tunstead Mill Nutters were reported to be formed.

On the website of the current Britannia team it says: ¹³

...the dances are known to be originated with Moorish pirates which the costume is that of what a Moorish pirate would wear. The Moorish pirates which originated from North Africa are said to have settled in Cornwall and they became employed in local mines. As mines and quarries opened in Lancashire in the 18th and 19th century some of the Cornish men headed north bringing their mining expertise with them and it is with these men that the dances were reputedly brought into this area, in particular two Cornish men who came to work in Whitworth (this was relayed by a former team member many years ago).

¹³ Britannia Coconut Dancers of Bacup, 'History' <<https://www.coconutters.co.uk/history/>> [accessed 13 October 2017].

It is true that there were Cornish settlers in the area. However, on checking census records for 1851, 1861 and 1871, it appears that the first records of Cornish settlers in the area are in 1871. There are families living in Tunstead Mill, Stacksteads and Lee Mill (a small settlement about half a mile from Tunstead Mill). Only one of these families has anyone working as a miner – Richard Thomas in Tunstead Bottoms. His youngest child is 9 in 1871 and was born in Cornwall, so it is likely the family did not move into the area until after 1861. The rest of his family and the other Cornish families are recorded as working mainly in the cotton industry, with a few who are labourers. Most of the families have young children born in Cornwall, which suggests that there was a migration into the area of families from Cornwall between 1861 and 1871. This would be too late to have brought the dance with them as the Tunstead Mill Nutters were reported as having been formed in 1857. There are no families in Whitworth in the 1851, 1861 and 1871 censuses shown as originating in Cornwall.

Roy Judge believed that the coconut dance ‘derived in some way from the kind of stage performance given by the Chiarini family’.¹⁴ This may seem unlikely at first glance, but the Chiarini family were a very popular entertainment group on the stage in the nineteenth century. They did circus acts, but there are also many playbills showing that they were performing the ‘Pas de Coco’ in the 1830s and 1840s and later. There were other theatrical groups who performed the dance, but it was the Chiarini family that seems to have made it particularly popular.

The following extract from the *Halifax Guardian* in August 1838 shows how the transmission from stage dance to street dance might have occurred: ¹⁵

The Chiarini family, in their admirable Cocoa Nut Dance, still elicit applause. This dance has now (we believe) been performed four weeks, and it appears as likely to run another

¹⁴ Roy Judge, “The Old English Morris Dance”: Theatrical Morris 1801–1880’, *Folk Music Journal*, 7.3 (1997), 311–50.

¹⁵ ‘Ryan’s Circus’, *Halifax Guardian*, 4 August 1838, p. 3, col. 1.

four weeks. Mr Ryan, by the aid of the Chiarinis, has made a decided hit in this dance. At every street-corner in Halifax, and in every bye-lane in the country, young men and children may be observed imitating the grotesque features of the Cocoa Nut Ballet, and it is ten to one, that, out of 20 lads whom you meet whistling in the town, nineteen have the Cocoa Nut tune in their mouths.

Roy Judge also believed that ‘shadowy figures [from the theatre] [. . .] were the means by which dance ideas and techniques were passed from one context to another’.¹⁶ The coconut dance as a stage dance is further considered below.

There was also a Cocoa Nut Dance performed by the Morris dancers in Buxton in 1859¹⁷ – this is only two years after the Tunstead Mill Nutters were reportedly formed.

The costumes

Els Moretons

Each dancer wears a headdress consisting of a red and yellow headband with a silver crescent at the front. The points of the crescent face upwards. Red and yellow ribbons are attached to the rear of the headdress and fall down the back of the dancer to his waist.

Each dancer wears a loose-fitting white shirt and blue breeches. Over the top of the breeches is a short, patterned skirt trimmed in either red or yellow (three of each).

Each dancer wears long white socks with either red or yellow canvas shoes. The colour of the shoes matches the colour of the trimming on the skirt. These are fastened with Roman gartering over the white socks.

Each dancer has small wooden round blocks attached to his hands and just above the knees. There is a further, slightly larger, round

¹⁶ Judge, “The Old English Morris Dance”, p. 339.

¹⁷ ‘Buxton Well Flowering, Midsummer-1859, Second Edition’, *Buxton Herald*, 23 June 1859, p. 8, col. 4.

wooden block attached to the waist by a belt. The block on the waist is worn centrally.

The dance costume is very similar to that seen in a photograph from 1943 that appears on the Els Moretons website,¹⁸ although this is in black-and-white. In this photograph the dancers appear to have small pompoms on the top of their canvas shoes.

Britannia Coconut Dancers

The Britannia dancers wear a similar costume to their forebears, the Tunstead Mill Nutters.

Each dancer wears a white hat decorated with braid, a feather, pompoms and a rosette together with a black sweater and black knee breeches with bells on the side. The hems of the breeches are trimmed with red. The dancers wear white socks and Lancashire clogs. Over the top of the breeches they wear a 'kilt' which is white with three horizontal red stripes. The kilt has a white strap which goes over either the right or left shoulder.

Each dancer has small wooden discs attached to their hands and just above the knees. As with Els Moretons there is another larger block on the waist attached by a belt. This block is smaller than Els Moretons' waist block and is worn slightly to one side.

The faces of the dancers are blackened.

The dances

Els Moretons

Only the first two figures of the dance have any age. The rest of the figures have been added from 1960 onwards. According to their website, there are currently seven figures of which six were danced when I recorded them. The figures are very simple with each figure lasting once through the tune. The dancers stop between figures.

¹⁸ Els Moretons, 'El ball dels Moretons'.

The characteristic movement in all the figures is clashing the wooden blocks held in the hands with those on the knees and waist and clashing them together.

Britannia Coconut Dancers

The Britannia dancers have five garland dances plus two coconut dances. The coconut dances are quite complex but have the same distinctive movement of clashing the wooden blocks together in a similar way to Els Moretons. They also clash hands with other dancers, which the Moretons do not.

There is one other similar feature to Els Moretons. During the dance pairs of dancers point fingers at each other. The Els Moretons' pointing movement involves putting their hands together and pointing to one side and then the other.

The tunes

Els Moretons

Figure 3 is the version of the tune as published on Els Moretons' website.¹⁹ In private correspondence with the group I have been told that the earliest manuscript version of the tune is from the early twentieth century.²⁰

Britannia Coconut Dancers

The Britannia Coconut Dancers use one tune ('Tip Toe Polka'²¹) when dancing with the brass band plus a second tune ('Shooting Star') when dancing to concertinas. I do not know how long these tunes have been associated with the dance and neither tune bears any resemblance to Els Moretons' tune. However, there is another

¹⁹ Els Moretons, 'El ball dels Moretons'.

²⁰ Antoni Oliver, email to the author, 11 January 2015.

²¹ The tune goes under various other names including 'Tip Top Polka' and 'Clow Bank'. Mary Yates, who was brought up in Bacup, has recently given the author a copy of a handwritten manuscript for a piano arrangement in which the tune is simply entitled 'Bacup "Nutters" Marching Tune'. This is thought to have been written out for Mary's father in Bacup in the 1950s.

well-known coconut dance tune, which is commonly called the 'Rochdale Coconut Dance'.



Figure 3: Els Moretons tune.

The tune known as the 'Rochdale Coconut Dance' was sent to Anne Geddes Gilchrist in 1927 by Henry Brierley. He was in his eighties at the time and said that he remembered the coconut dancers and the tune from when he was a lad between 1852 and 1860. Rochdale is approximately three miles from Whitworth and six miles from Bacup. I have been told by other dancers in the area that there is no record of coconut dancers in Rochdale. However, Henry Brierley clearly states in his correspondence with Anne Gilchrist that the Rochdale carts were 'generally attended by a band of what they called "Cocoanut Dancers"'.²² However, in a subsequent letter he says that he never saw them actually dancing, but just standing and beating out the rhythm of the tune. He continues: 'perhaps I ought to say I only remember them thus, for as they must have accompanied the

²² Henry Brierley, Letter to Anne Geddes Gilchrist, 19 February 1927, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, AGG/4/50.

Rushcart some job of dancing or prancing with the cart drawers seems inevitable'.²³

Henry Brierley was an antiquary and was very involved in various Lancashire parish register transcriptions. Prior to his correspondence with Anne Geddes Gilchrist, he had published a book, *The Rochdale Reminiscences* in which he also mentions the coconut dancers.²⁴ Whether being an antiquarian makes his evidence more or less reliable I am not sure. However, his work on the Lancashire Parish Records would require accuracy and copies of these transcriptions are still being used today. I would therefore suggest that his evidence should generally be taken as reliable.

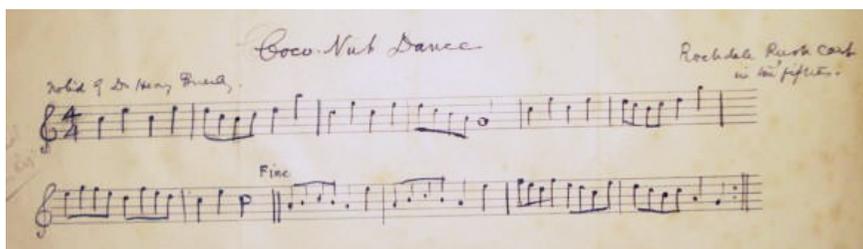


Figure 4: Rochdale Coco Nut Dance.

Figure 4 shows the tune as sent by Henry Brierley to Anne Geddes Gilchrist.²⁵

The tune used by Els Moretons and the Rochdale Coconut tune share a lot of similarities which are discussed below.

Coconut Dances in the Provence Region of France: Lei Cocot

There is a third coconut dance tradition called 'Lei Cocot' or 'Les Cocons' from the Provence region of France. All the current exponents seem to be 'Groupes Folkloriques'. They do, however, all use the same tune which does not appear to be related to either the Els

²³ Henry Brierley, Letter to Anne Geddes Gilchrist, 2 March 1927, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, AGG/4/50.

²⁴ Henry Brierley, *The Rochdale Reminiscences* (Rochdale: Rochdale Times, 1923), p. 28.

²⁵ Enclosed with letter from Henry Brierley to Anne Geddes Gilchrist dated 2 March 1927, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, AGG/4/50.

Moretons or Rochdale Coconut tunes or to those used by the current Britannia Coconut Dancers.

According to Theresa Buckland the dance appears to have died out in the 1890s.²⁶ However, a group did perform at a 'jeux floraux' organized by 'Le Félibrige' in Aix-en-Provence in 1913.²⁷ Le Félibrige is an organization originally set up in 1854 to promote all things Provençal. The earliest reference to 'Lei Cocot' seems to be in 1864 in *Lou tambourin* by François Vidal.²⁸ 'Tambourin' is the name given to a type of drum played in Provence. The book is divided into three parts. The first two concern the history of the instrument and the method of playing the galoubet (a three-hole pipe) and tambourin. The third section is devoted to the national airs of Provence. It is in this section that the tune for 'Lei Cocot' is given, plus a short text in the Provençal dialect.

Figure 5 shows the tune as given by Vidal and used by the current revival groups. The accompanying text translates as:²⁹

Eight, ten or sixteen dancers wearing white breeches, coloured shirts with their faces disguised, each having eight coconuts fixed to the knees, breasts, hands and also the elbows, go forward to their partner and back and cross over in all directions, and dance gaily to this tune, which they accompany in rhythm by hitting their instruments against each other, or even against those of the dancers they meet, whether they are opposite or alongside.

I was told by an old witness, that not more than fifty years ago, one named Curet (from Aix-en-Provence), then a dancer at the theatre in Lyon, taught the chorus of our theatre the ballet Paul et Virginie, and that the steps which the pretend Moors of Provence have executed, very gracefully, ever since,

²⁶ Buckland, 'Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts', p. 6.

²⁷ 'Jeux floraux et cours d'amour, Aix-en-Provence fête Mistral', *Le Radical*, 13 May 1913, p. 4, col. 3.

²⁸ François Vidal, *Lou tambourin: istori de l'estrumen provençau* (Ais: Remondet-Aubin; Avignon: J. Roumanille, 1864), p. 280.

²⁹ Translation by Alison Whitaker and Thierry Cerisier using Frédéric Mistral, *Tresor dòu Félibrige: dictionnaire provençal-français* ([Aix]: Remondet-Aubin, 1878).

would be nothing more than the dance of the Negroes performed in this ballet. – Whoever doesn't believe it, should see for themselves.



Figure 5: Lei Cocot.

In *Statistique du Département des Bouche-du-Rhone* (1826), a section is devoted in great detail to the customs and dances of the area.³⁰ This mentions many of the dances included in Vidal's book, but makes no mention of 'Lei Cocot'. Given the detail within the book on the various customs and dances, this would tend to imply that the dance did not exist in the area in 1826. Although this is by no means conclusive, it would seem likely that 'Lei Cocot' appeared sometime between 1826 and 1864. Together with the theatre reference in *Lou tambourin*, there appears to be a similar pattern to the Rossendale Dance.

Monique Decitre includes 'Lei Cocot' in her *Dances of France*, published in 1951.³¹ The dance is published in great detail, but it is unclear whether the figures are from the nineteenth century or a product of the revival.

Cocoa Nut Dances on the Nineteenth-century Stage

The earliest reference I have found to the cocoa nut dance being performed on the stage is in 1824. The *Public Ledger and Daily Advertis-*

³⁰ Christophe de Villeneuve, *Statistique du Département des Bouche-du-Rhone* (Marseille: Antoine Ricard, 1826) III: 208-211.

³¹ Monique Decitre, *Dansez la France* (Paris: Dumas, 1951) II: 214-218.

er carried the following advertisement for Davis's Royal Amphitheatre, Westminster Bridge, London: ³²

EVERY EVENING during the Week, the unprecedentedly magnificent Representation of The BATTLE of WATERLOO; with, first time in England a grand Equestrian Ballet, called The CARNIVAL of VENICE; or, The Masquerade on a Horse in full gallop. Invented by Mons. Ducrow, and in which, without quitting his Horse's back, he will personate the Characters of Polichinel, Pierrot, Harlequin, Colombine, Bacchus, and Adonis. After which, Exercises, by the Turkish Mare Beda, and the little Horse Harlequin – Mons. DUCROW's Feats on Two Horses. To conclude with a new Entertainment, by Mr. W. Barrymore, called AGAMEMNON, the Faithful Negro; in the course of which, a grand Ballet and Cocoa Nut Dance.

In the same paper later in the month there is a review of the performance:³³

DAVIS'S AMPHITHEATRE. – We again visited this amusing and fashionable place of diversion on Saturday night, and were highly gratified to find 'The Battle of Waterloo' had lost none of its attractions by its frequent repetitions. We have already given in detail our opinion on this meritorious piece; suffice it therefore to say it is, in our estimation, the best got up Military Spectacle ever produced at any Theatre; Du Crow's Horsemanship, we repeat, stamps him, without exception, unrivalled in the equestrian art. The Horses, undoubtedly, for tractability and beauty, are unparalleled; and as to their manoeuvres, particularly those of the Turkish mare Beda, and the little horse Harlequin, they must be seen to be believed, as they absolutely beggar all description. The entertainments concluded with a pleasing Bagatelle, called 'Agamemnon; or, the Faithful Negro', which met with much applause from the Deities in the higher regions, though candour compels us to say, that neither consistency nor

³² 'Davis's Royal Amphitheatre', *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser*, 7 June 1824, p. 1, col. 4.

³³ 'Davis's Amphitheatre', *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser*, 21 June 1824, p. 3, col. 5.

probability form its prominent feature. In the course of the Piece is introduced a new Ballet by Monsieur Chappe, in which that Gentleman and Mrs. Serle were the leading characters; a Cocoa Nut Dance, by Negroes, forms a part of the Ballet. We can only say of it, that we heard no complaints of its brevity.

Although 'The Battle of Waterloo' ran for many weeks, Agamemnon with its associated cocoa nut dance ran for only approximately three weeks.

By February the following year, the Theatre Royal in Manchester was advertising the last week of 'The Battle of Waterloo' together with a production of 'The Slave's Revenge'. This had a much larger billing as this advertisement from the Manchester Mercury shows:³⁴

THEATRE-ROYAL MANCHESTER

THE LAST WEEK OF WATERLOO; And Second Night of a New Piece, called

THE SLAVE'S REVENGE

THIS PRESENT TUESDAY, the Evening's Entertainments will commence with an entirely new interesting Melo Drama, in two acts, (partly founded on facts) with new Dresses and Decorations.

THE SLAVE'S REVENGE

This Piece written by and produced under the direction of Mr W. Barrymore; the Music composed by Mr. Thomas Hughes; the Scenery painted by Mr. Phillips; and the Machinery executed by Mr. Caygill, - In the course of the Piece, will be introduced the celebrated COCOA NUT DANCE.

The review of 'The Slave's Revenge' in the same paper the following week is not particularly flattering, but does include the following: 'In the course of the piece the cocoa-nut dance was introduced, in which slaves, with a shell in each hand, strike a tune on others attached to the knees and chest - a curious specimen of African amusement.'³⁵

³⁴ 'Theatre-Royal, Manchester' *Manchester Mercury*, 8 February 1825, p. 1, col. 1.

³⁵ 'Theatre-Royal', *Manchester Mercury*, 15 February 1825, p. 3, col. 2.

In the same month at the Olympic Circus in Liverpool, a 'Grand Cocoa Nut Dance' was included in a production depicting Captain Cook's second voyage to the Sandwich Islands.³⁶

The cocoa nut dance, coconut dance or Pas de Coco appear regularly in advertisements and reviews throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and all over the country.

During the 1830s the dance is often called the SHAW-WA-SHEW and crops up in productions of the melodrama 'Mungo Park', often in a circus environment although also in theatres, especially in pantomimes. The names of the circuses change: Batty's Circus,³⁷ Ryan's Circus,³⁸ Hengler's Circus,³⁹ Cooke's Royal Circus⁴⁰ and others. They all appear to have similar acts and were probably closely connected.

There is also more than one group of performers doing the dance. In addition to the Chiarini family mentioned above, there were the Dalhi Family,⁴¹ the Four Liliputian Africans,⁴² the Four Kaffirs,⁴³ the Ethiopian Brothers,⁴⁴ the Plege Family,⁴⁵ the Ginnett Family,⁴⁶ the Four Ricardos⁴⁷ and many others. However, it is the Chiarini family that gets the highest billing throughout the 1840s.

The dance is also often performed by the 'Corps de Ballet'⁴⁸ or by juvenile groups.⁴⁹ It appears to be very much a novelty act that is shoe-horned into all sorts of productions, although mainly circuses and pantomimes. The setting of the dance's supposed origins varies from

³⁶ 'Olympic Circus, Christian Street, Liverpool' *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 February 1825, p. 1, col. 1.

³⁷ 'Unprecedented Attraction at Batty's Circus Royal' *Hampshire Advertiser*, 8 March 1834, p. 1, col. 6.

³⁸ 'Ryan's Circus, North Street' *Bristol Mercury*, 20 September 1834, p. 3, col. 1.

³⁹ 'Hengler's Grand Cirque, Curzon Hall, Birmingham' *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 30 April 1868, p. 1, col. 1.

⁴⁰ 'Cooke's Royal Circus, Nethergate, Dundee' *Dundee Courier*, 15 March 1880, p. 1, col. 2.

⁴¹ 'Royal Grecian Saloon, City Road' *Morning Advertiser*, 7 August 1839, p. 2, col. 5.

⁴² 'Ducrow's National Olympic Arena of Arts' *Bristol Mercury*, 2 April 1842, p. 8, col. 1.

⁴³ 'Lincoln Arboretum' *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 2 August 1878, p. 4, col. 5.

⁴⁴ 'Red Cow Gardens, Dalston' *Morning Advertiser*, 2 August 1844, p. 1, col. 1.

⁴⁵ 'Theatre-Royal, Ducrow's' *York Herald and General Advertiser*, 17 June 1843, p. 4, col. 1.

⁴⁶ 'Ryan's Royal Circus, North Street, Bristol' *Bristol Mercury*, 28 November 1840, p. 5, col. 2.

⁴⁷ 'For coming Pantomimes, The Five Ricardos', *The Era*, 31 August 1879, p. 15, col. 1.

⁴⁸ 'Public Amusements at Liverpool, Theatre Royal' *The Era*, 27 February 1853, p. 11, col. 4.

⁴⁹ 'Hengler's Grand Cirque, Haymarket, Newcastle-on-Tyne' *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 5 October 1868, p. 2, col. 1.

the West Indies,⁵⁰ to Africa,⁵¹ to India,⁵² to China⁵³ and to the South Seas,⁵⁴ depending on which production the dance is being performed in.

By the 1870s, the dance is sometimes referred to as the 'old' cocoa-nut dance. It was also performed at the Folies Bergères Music Hall in Paris which had engaged the 'celebrated Hanlon Family'. A review in *The Era* gives a description of various acts and continues: 'Then the trio of juveniles go through the famous old cocoa-nut dance'.⁵⁵

By the 1890s the dance has become firmly established in the repertoire of minstrel groups such as the Gaiety Minstrels,⁵⁶ the Stowell Memorial Amateur Minstrels⁵⁷ etc. particularly as part of a sketch called 'Granny's Birthday'.

One reference which may be of particular importance in tying the stage productions in with 'Lei Cocot' is this extract from a review in October 1870 of London Amusements: "The Olympic Programme has been varied by [. . .] the production of a new extravaganza called "Paul and Virginia," borrowing, however, nothing from the original story but the title'.⁵⁸

The same review goes on to say: 'but the best thing in the extravaganza is a cocoa-nut dance by "ten little niggers" performed in faint remembrance as to tune and style of the original one introduced at the Strand Theatre thirty years since by the Chiarini family'.

Another review of the same production states: 'One laughable effect is the introduction of "ten little niggers" who dance to the well-known tune with a cocoa nut accompaniment'.⁵⁹

⁵⁰ 'Splendid Equestrian Novelties, Circus, Widemarsh St., Hereford' *Hereford Times*, 29 October 1836, p. 2, col. 6.

⁵¹ 'For Eight Nights Only, Ducrow's National Establishment' *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 11 December 1841, p. 5, col. 1.

⁵² 'Preston, Theatre Royal and Opera House' *The Era*, 6 January 1878, p. 5, col. 2.

⁵³ 'Cooke's Circus' *Aberdeen Journal*, 26 January 1886, p. 4, col. 6.

⁵⁴ 'Olympic Circus, Christian Street, Liverpool' *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 February 1825, p. 1, col. 1.

⁵⁵ 'The Drama in Paris, The Folies Bergère Music Hall' *The Era*, 17 November 1872, p. 10, col. 1.

⁵⁶ 'The Gaiety Minstrels at St. Julian's Hall' *The Star* (Guernsey), 3 December 1896, p. 2, col. 6.

⁵⁷ 'Mayoral Entertainment at Pendleton' *Manchester Courier, and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 7 January 1895, p. 7, col. 3.

⁵⁸ 'London Amusements' *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 21 October 1870, p. 4, col. 6.

⁵⁹ 'Public Amusements, Olympic Theatre' *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 23 October 1870, p. 5, col. 3.

'Paul and Virginia' was a popular piece on the stage in Britain from the late eighteenth century onwards. It was variously described as an opera,⁶⁰ a musical drama,⁶¹ musical farce⁶² or ballet.⁶³ It started life as a French story, 'Paul et Virginie', set in Mauritius and written by Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. It was first published in 1788. Advertisements for an English translation by Helen Maria Williams were appearing by 1798.⁶⁴ In France the story was turned into a play set to music by Rodolphe Kreutzer and performed for the first time by the Comédiens Italiens on Saturday 15 January 1791.⁶⁵

In May 1803, the following advertisement had appeared in the *Manchester Mercury*:⁶⁶

For the Benefit of Mr Connor, Box Office Keeper, Theatre-Royal, Manchester

On Friday next, May 27th, 1803, will be acted a favourite Comedy, called

WILD OATS; or, The Strolling Gentlemen.

To which will be added, the admired Musical Piece of PAUL and VIRGINIA.

A Characteristic Dance by Four Indians, And Cymbal Dance In the Character of a Negro, by Mr Mills.

The *Manchester Mercury* was a weekly paper in 1803, but unfortunately there is no review of this production in the next edition of the paper. Is the characteristic dance by four Indians a forerunner of the cocoa-nut dance that appears on the stage twenty years later?

⁶⁰ 'By Desire of the Young Ladies of Mrs. Jedwine's School' *Kentish Chronicle*, 28 May 1802, p. 1, col. 3.

⁶¹ 'Theatre, Canterbury' *Kentish Gazette*, 29 May 1801, p. 1, col. 1.

⁶² 'Theatre-Royal' *Caledonian Mercury*, 29 May 1809, p. 3, col. 5.

⁶³ 'The Morning Post, King's Theatre' *Morning Post*, 26 June 1819, p. 3, col. 2.

⁶⁴ 'New Books for Youth, 16, Paul and Virginia' *Hull Advertiser and Exchange Gazette*, 4 August 1798, p. 1, col. 2.

⁶⁵ Rodolphe Kreutzer, *Paul et Virginie*, (Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1791)
<<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b90673057/f3.image>> [accessed 13 October 2017].

⁶⁶ 'For the Benefit of Mr. Connor' *Manchester Mercury*, 24 May 1803, p. 1, col. 1.

A Comparison of Coconut Dance Tunes

In addition to the tunes mentioned earlier in the article, there is a tune called simply 'The Cocoa Nut Dance' which appears in *The Musical Casket: or, Melodies for the Million* published in 1843.⁶⁷ The publication contains popular tunes of the day so it is a distinct possibility that this is the tune for at least one of the early stage versions of the coconut dance (Figure 6).

Musical Casket Cocoa Nut Dance Tune v Els Moretons tune

Figure 7 compares the A music from the *Musical Casket* Cocoa Nut Dance with the A music used by Els Moretons. Bars 1 to 6 and 8 to 12 are very similar. The *Musical Casket* version is syncopated in places where the Els Moretons tune is not and the tune goes up rather than down in bars 4 and 12. Bars 7 and 8 may appear different at first glance, but the two versions harmonize perfectly. Bars 13 and 14 follow the same pattern of notes, but are either a tone or semitone apart. Bar 15 of the Els Moretons tune ends with a run down to the final note rather than the 1843 version that has a run up followed by an octave drop. The differences are fairly minor and the two are clearly versions of the same tune.

In the *Musical Casket* version, three paused notes are shown for the introduction. This is similar to the music used by the current Els Moretons team whose musicians start the tune with one long note.

⁶⁷ James McEwen, *The Musical Casket: or, Melodies for the Million* (no 6) (London: Duncombe & Moon, 1843), tune number 131, p. 47, copies in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and the Bodleian Library. What may be a variant issue or a bibliographical ghost with an attributed date of c. 1830 is held by Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, USA.

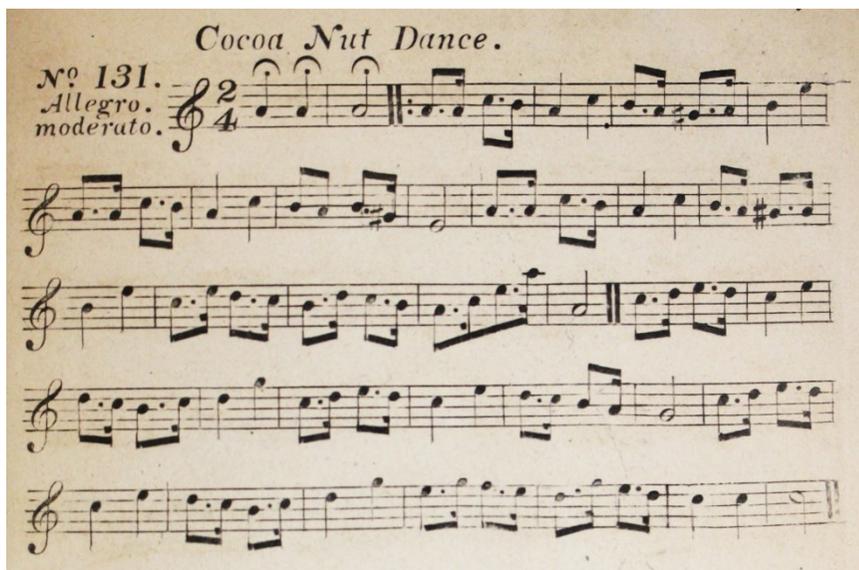


Figure 6: Cocoa Nut Dance from *The Musical Casket*.

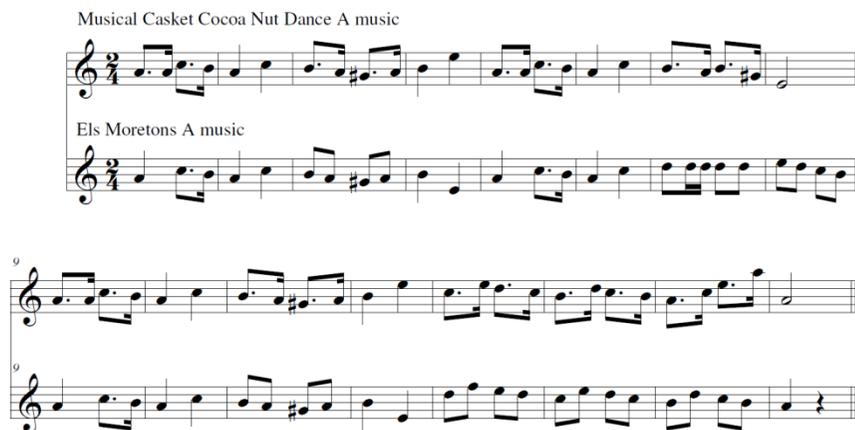


Figure 7: Musical Casket Cocoa Nut Dance Tune v Els Moretons tune

Musical Casket Cocoa Nut Dance Tune v Rochdale Coconut Dance

Figure 8 compares the B music from the Musical Casket Cocoa Nut Dance with the A music from the Rochdale Coconut Dance.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef. The top staff is titled "Musical Casket Cocoa Nut Dance B music" and begins at measure 17. The bottom staff is titled "Rochdale Coconut Tune from Henry Brierley" and also begins at measure 17. The two staves are nearly identical, with the bottom staff continuing to measure 25. The notation consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some syncopation in the earlier measures.

Figure 8: Musical Casket Cocoa Nut Dance Tune v Rochdale Coconut Dance

Here the similarities are even closer. The only differences are a few extra passing notes in the *Musical Casket* version, the syncopation and an alternative note in the penultimate bar.

It is quite remarkable that an octogenarian in the 1920s would remember the tune from his youth in the 1850s and for it to have altered so little.

It is clear that the tune used by Els Moretons and that collected from Henry Brierley started life as the same tune. Els Moretons use the A part of the tune and Henry Brierley used the B music as his A music. In each case the other half of the tune does not match the *Musical Casket* tune. Where did these come from? In both cases, it could simply be that they are harmony lines which have changed over the years to become the main line of the tune. The Henry Brierley tune works better as a harmony than the Els Moretons tune.

There is one further item of information regarding the Rochdale coconut dance tune. In a phone conversation on 1 September 2016 with Clive Morton of the Whitworth Morris Men, he informed me that when they first started dancing in the 1970s, a Mr Greenwood helped them to re-create the Whitworth dances. Unlike the Britannia Coconut Dancers, the Whitworth dancers of the late nineteenth century had two separate teams, one of which performed garland dances and the other a coconut dance. Mr Greenwood never danced with the coconut dancers, but his father was the captain of the last nutters team and he was their mascot. The team practised in Shawforth ra-

ther than Whitworth itself. Mr Greenwood sang the tune that the coconut dancers used, and according to Clive Morton, this was the same as the Rochdale Coconut Dance tune, except that it started with the minor music rather than the major. This would match the version in *The Musical Casket*. As far as I can gather, the tune was never notated or recorded from Mr Greenwood.

From the analysis of the tunes, it now seems likely that the Lancashire and Mallorcan coconut dances started life as a stage dance, probably in the first half of the nineteenth century. The tune was well enough known to be included in *The Musical Casket* along with other popular tunes of the time.

Summary

There are a lot of similarities between the Els Moretons and Rossendale coconut dance traditions:

- The costumes of both traditions include a headdress, breeches, skirt over the top of the breeches and wooden discs attached to hands, knees and waist;
- In both dances there is a characteristic movement using the wooden discs;
- The Britannia Coconut Dancers have a story that the dance originated with Moorish pirates. Els Moretons have stories of the dance having been seen by a Spanish soldier in a Moroccan camp;
- The tune heard by Henry Brierley in Rochdale in the 1850s and the tune used by Els Moretons appear to have a common ancestor published in 1843 as 'Cocoa Nut Dance';
- It is likely that the Cocoa Nut Dance tune was that used by early versions of the stage dance;
- Newspaper references show the popularity of the stage dance. There is also a reference from 1838 that shows that in Halifax 'young men and children may be observed imitating the grotesque features of the Coco Nut Ballet';
- The likely dates for the start of both the Rossendale and Mallorcan dances are in the 1850s.

There are also similarities between these two traditions and 'Lei Cocot' from Provence. There is the reference to the dance having been performed on the stage in a production of the ballet 'Paul et Virginie' no more than 50 years before 1864. A coconut dance was performed on the stage in London in 1870 called 'Paul and Virginia'. The review of this makes reference to the original of this piece being performed in the past. The reviewer also refers to the Chiarini family, but it is unclear if this is specific to 'Paul and Virginia' or specifically the cocoa nut dance.

'Paul and Virginia' was performed on the English stages from the late eighteenth century onwards. In the Manchester production in 1803 it was followed by a characteristic dance by four Indians. Is it possible that this was a forerunner of the cocoa nut dance?

Conclusion

If we take 1854 as being the starting date for Els Moretons and 1857 as the starting date for the coconut dancing in the Rossendale Valley, then it would seem unlikely that there was any direct cross-fertilization of ideas between the two teams. This would point to there being another means of transmission of the dance from which both groups developed independently.

As we have seen above, the newspaper reports of performances by the Chiarini Family clearly show that people were copying the dances from the stage and dancing them on the streets. Roy Judge also believed that dancing masters may have had a hand in the transmission of dances from stage to street. He cites Paul Valentine (1839-1924), a well-known ballet master at Drury Lane, as having the Cocoa Nut Dance in his repertoire. He taught this to a group of factory workers in St Mary Cray in 1894.⁶⁸

The Chiarini family travelled extensively with their performances, not just in England, but throughout Europe, America and Australia. It seems quite feasible that at some stage they visited either Mallorca

⁶⁸ Judge, 'The Old English Morris Dance', p. 339.

or possibly somewhere that Father Pius Caldentey Perrelló trained as a priest. However, there were also many other stage groups that performed a coconut dance and it might be one of these groups that influenced the priest.

There seems to be a strong parallel between the development of the coconut dance in Lancashire and the 'Lei Cocot' dance in Provence.

It does seem highly likely that the coconut dances originated on the stage and then moved to the streets. The street versions and stage versions then carried on in parallel until the late nineteenth/early twentieth century when the stage version appears to have died out.