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**Published paper**

Millington, Peter (2011) *Hunting the Mysterious Okalolies*. Tristan da Cunha Newsletter (49). pp. 34-35.

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## Hunting the Mysterious Okalolies by Peter Millington

Association members at recent Annual Gatherings may be aware of my interest in the traditions of Tristan da Cunha, in particular Old Year's Night, when the young men of the island dress up in fantastic disguises and go round the village scaring people. My main academic interest is folk drama – short verse plays performed in disguise and taken round houses and pubs, mainly at Christmas and New Year. The actors are often called mummers or guisers. However, these names are also used for similar visiting customs without plays, where the main thing is trying to guess the identity of the visitors. They used to be common throughout Europe and the east coast of North America, and are still popular in some island communities, notably in Newfoundland, Denmark, and as it turns out Tristan da Cunha.



*Photo from James Glass of Old Year's Night celebrations 2004*

Allan Crawford's silent film from the 1940s includes Old Year's Night, but needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, because many of his scenes were specially re-staged to take place in daylight. The film nicely shows the costumes and visiting, but there is none of the facial disguise that everyone else mentions.

Old Year's Night is mentioned in sound recordings from the 2006 oral history project, and from visits made in 1962 to Calshot by collectors from the English Folk Dance and Song Society. These are possibly the earliest accounts of the custom from the mouths of Tristanians themselves. I am also grateful to the Tristanians I have met at the Association Annual gathering for sharing their own recollections with me.

The Okalolies are all teenagers and young men, although I have heard rumours of occasional infiltration by females. Boys look forward to taking part for the first time as a kind of rite of passage.

My interest was started by a couple of online books mentioning "mummers" on Tristan, and grew when I bought a copy of the Schreiers' book where they said the Old Year's Night revellers are called "Okalolies". During some idle web surfing I found a picture on the SARTMA *Tristan Times* website similar to Newfoundland and Danish mummers, tantalisingly captioned: "This is a photo of Christmas/New Year Celebrations but where in the world is it?" I thought I recognised the green roofed building and the looming mountain backdrop, and quickly confirmed that it was indeed the Residency on Tristan da Cunha. I obtained a copy of the SARTMA photograph, and my research moved on apace. I wrote to the then Administrator, Mike Hentley who kindly sent me a detailed account of the Okalolies at his 2005 Old Year's Night Reception. He later sent me some photographs taken by his wife Janice in 2006.

Further searching found regular mentions of the custom in books from 1910 onwards, and other photographs, mainly taken since the 1961 volcano eruption at the Administrators' receptions.



*Images from Allan Crawford's 1940s film shows -*

*Above: The mummers entering a house, led by an accordionist and a rifleman;  
Left: A mummer very different from his 21<sup>st</sup> Century counterpart.*



Preparations start before Old Year's Night in secret, making costumes and masks. The main guiding principles are to disguise oneself as completely and scarily as possible. Some participants have always dressed up as women, borrowing clothes from female kinfolk. Recently, old green oilskins have been used, drizzled with paint, so some people call them the Green Men.

Nowadays they wear commercial latex horror masks, but earlier the masks were made from whatever materials were to hand, such as pieces of hide or plastic, maybe with a cow's tail for a beard. Some of the older accounts say the guisers blackened their faces – a tactic also used in England and other parts of the world. Masks that cover the whole head, wigs, hoods and hats, plus gloves ensure anonymity. The outfit may be completed with a long stick decorated with strips of fabric, bunches of flowers, or even an old rubber buoy – whatever takes their fancy.





*Education Officer John Whittington's photo of Tristan "Ghosts" dancing on old year's night 1980.*

Since the Islanders' return in 1963, one of the highlights of the Okalolies' rounds has been visiting the Residence, where the Administrator holds a reception for the men of the island. In the past, the Administrator's wife was the only woman present, but Mike Hentley started bringing in women from the café to do the catering. Mike told me that the Okalolies maintained their disguise, and would skulk round the back to drink so that they would not reveal themselves. This may be changing however. Recent photographs show them accepting drinks from the barmaids without their masks. In Mike Hentley's time, the Okalolies went on the Chief Islander's house, and finished with their own party or braai until daybreak. In the past, and maybe even now, many people did not find out who had been behind the masks until the next morning.

I am interested in where the Tristan custom originally came from. Allan Crawford, Peter Munch and others have asserted that the custom originated in Scotland. This is indeed possible, because guising has a long history in Scotland, not least around Kelso, the home town of the founding settler William Glass. However, there were similar customs in most of the of the settlers' home countries, all of which contributed to the Tristan tradition. No doubt the islanders have added new activities of their own, such as the ringing of the gong.

The Okalolies adjust their behaviour to prevent discovery. For instance, they may disguise the way they walk by moving with a rolling gait. Above all, they do not speak, or at most mumble.

Thus prepared, the men go round the village visiting most of the houses in the village, making lots of noise, but being mindful of the sick and elderly. In the past, they fired a gunshot at each house for luck, or they would stretch a hide over an old drum and beat that. Nowadays, Dennis Swain tells me they make a beeline for the gong. They are allowed, even expected, to make light mischief, especially chasing the girls, and woe betide them if they get caught. The girls of course complain about this treatment, but it has been said that they would probably complain more if they were not chased!

On entering houses, the Okalolies keep silent, and the householders try to guess who they are. If they guess correctly, the relevant person reveals himself, but quite often they leave unrecognised and still masked. Either way, they are rewarded with refreshments, which for those still wearing masks, means having to drink through a straw.



*For comparison: Mummies in Newfoundland, Canada  
Photo: Brianna Mercer, courtesy of the Mummies Festival, St John's  
Below: Janice Hentley's photo shows the Okalolies assembled in a menacing group in the Residency garden on Old Year's Night 2006*



The unique name "Okalolies" could provide a clue regarding origins. Dani Schreier and I differ on where it may have come from. Dani tentatively suggested that it might have come from the Afrikaans words "Olie Kolonies" – meaning 'old ugly men'. I on the other hand think it might have come from Gaelic. The name for Old Year's Night in Gaelic varies - "Oidhche Choille", "Oidhche Challaig", "Oidhche Challain", etc. The pronunciation is a minefield for English speakers, but the first of these approximates to "Oiky Hooley", which is not too dissimilar to Okalolie. Furthermore, visiting in disguise on Old Year's Night still takes place in the Scottish Hebrides today. However, by what route would a Gaelic name have found its way to Tristan da Cunha? Gaelic was never spoken in Kelso.

I have not yet visited Tristan, but when I do, maybe I will be able to get answers to some of the questions I have. I am interested in finding out more about the home made hide masks and drums, and I would be particularly interested in knowing if there are any other old photographs or sound recordings. If you can help, or want to put me right, please email me at: p.millington@sheffield.ac.uk