Street Performances by Afro-Americans in New Orleans

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"Street Performances by Afro-Americans in New Orleans Parades and the Mardi Gras Indians"

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On the morning of Shrove Tuesday, peak and closing day of the Carnival season in New Orleans, crowds gather in many different parts of the city. On the main avenues, carnival fans are waiting for one of the most popular parade, Zulu, an all black parade which precedes Rex and offers itself as a parody of the famous Krewe. In more marginal neighborhoods, uptown and downtown, smaller groups attend to the last preparations of the Mardi Gras Indians, outside each of the house bases of the twenty-five tribes. The chiefs and their followers put on resplendent costumes and get ready to move through the streets in search of a confrontation with some other tribe.

There is apparently no connection between the two events= geographically the routes followed by Zulu and the tribes hardly ever meet, stylistically the street dramas they perform are very different; Zulu and the indians have found their distinct and separate place in the Carnival and while Zulu is very popular, fewer people know about the tribes. But both parades share some characteristics which tell much about racial relations and minority status in the city, about the composition of the black community, its division and diversity; both relate in interesting ways to the history of blacks and to aspects of the cultural life Afro-americans have brought to the Crescent City with its roots in Caribbean, African and native Indian expressive forms.

For blacks, Carnival has traditionally been a time of fun, recreation, gathering, picnic and cooking. They have converted some thoroughfares (mainly Clairborne Avenue, recently ruined by an expressway) into picnic grounds and seized the opportunity to cross certain lines by invading territories the racial code of the city implicitly forbade them to tread. During the carnival season when rules can be broken and constraints released, many limits were nevertheless set on black freedom: blacks from early Spanish colonial times were not supposed to mask –a privilege granted to the Caucasians alone,[1] and when the Carnival came into existence in 1857, they were not supposed to participate in the city's rejoicings.Yet they have gradually and firmly penetrated the Carnival not only as onlookers, or band players (the musical presence of black performers has become indispensable in most parades) or flambeau carriers (young and strongs blacks are selected to carry the heavy flambeaux that adorn certain processions), they have organized their own parades, developed their own rituals as extension and transformation of ancient ceremonies.

As early as 1820 a group of black creoles who had returned fom Paris organized a mask procession, and voluntary and separate associations have exited in the black community since the late eighteenth century, structuring institutional and ceremonial life, ritualizing social practices. Zulu, as most Mardi Gras Krewes, grew out of this associative life.[2] It was created by a section of the black population concerned about publicly asserting its status, achievement and success. Yet, at the same time as it strove for recognition it asserted itself as a wholly separate —and African — street event and as a parody of white Krewes. These different trends toward integration and separation — each prevailing in turn upon

the other — have always co-existed and account for the ambiguities of the Zulu parade, which is both imitation and satire, both self derisive and self assertive.

First on the scene in Shrove Tuesday Zulu precedes Rex, " the king of misrule", and tries to match the King's misruling as well as mock its regal splendor. The name, which is said to have come from a famous vaudeville show and is also a real African name, was chosen as a deliberate break from the New Orleans tradition of Creole or Roman names. Zulu uses many colours — gold yellow, purple and green, the colours of New Orleans, but sets them off in a black and white dominant color scheme. Costumes are black capes and jackets, or "authentic jungle" clothes, wigs of black moss, grass skirts, black tights and gloves. Faces are painted black in the minstrel fashion, the rims of eyes and mouth white. Floats whose number have varied through the years feature a collection of shrunken heads and jungle beasts. New figures have been added, like the Royal Prognosticator or Voodoo doctor. Painted coconuts are used as expensive throws.[3] With its jungle and minstrel motifs, Zulu seems more a parody of Africa than of the white world and ironically it appeared on the New Orleans scene at the time when the Philadelphia Mummers were criticized for wearing black faces. Yet more subtly Zulu is using the minstrel tradition in the same way blacks did when they created their first minstrel shows, turning what was meant as a caricature of slaves into a satirical representation of whites, a veiled threat to the power structure.

Popular among Carnival crowds, Zulu has not been approved of by all sections of the black community, a community class- and color-conscious, traditionally divided between black creoles (*gens de couleur*) —who have struggled to maintain their status in New Orleans society by often spurning the lower class blacks— the more africanized blacks and the lowdown rural blacks who migrated at the time of Reconstruction. Each group identifies itself by class and neighborhood or "ward" affiliation, each holds sway on a special territory. Zulu is neither genuinely creole nor authentically African, neither elite nor lowdown. It has been blamed for its facial disguises, its masks dressed as uncivilized savages, throwing coconuts like monkeys; for presenting a vulgar or too burlesque image of black life ; for holding in Mardi Gras the same function as a clown in a circus (Daniel Q. Thompson argues that Rex is more beautiful and impressive because Zulu is ridiculous: "A man going up on a high wire is more effective if two clowns fall off first".)[4] Zulu came under serious attack at the time of the Civil Rights Movement; part of the community — even funeral homes which had been its principal fiancial support — tried to boycott the parade in 1961. Saturnalia did not fit the mood of the time and Zulu, this " Uncle Tom in wheels", was also charged with making mockery of an honorable African tribe, with ignoring the liberation movement in African countries and the seriousness of the claim made by blacks in the U.S.A.

In spite of all this criticism, Zulu remained firmly on the scene, with the support of the Mayor and white merchants whose business thrives on the manufacturing of floats and costumes. Its king is an affluent black who is thus rewarded for the dues he has paid to the club; in 1949 Armstrong was elected king, and was given the keys of the city by the Mayor; this memorable event has established the reputation of Zulu, whose popularity has remained high.

In fact, the parade, even if it is the production of a particular club and is more successful among whites, is a meaningful and complex cultural event. Itis part of a performance system where one seeks power by playing out negative stereotyped roles in public by switching roles and codes labelled as white or black, as good or

bad, proper or improper. It also brings together several traditions of satire and masking, minstrel and vaudeville, of music and brass bands, of song and dance, of "election day" celebration. It also fuses European customs –it started at a time when black creoles were anxious to get to Europe and emulate European culture– with Caribbean, Latin American and African ones. The composition of its costumes relates it to different continents: whereas the moss is a symbol of Louisiana, the coconuts are riches from the diamond mines of Africa which bring gold to the poor. Incidentally, the rich- poor relationship is a recurrent motif in all parades: through the throws, the richer ones who parade on the floats symbolically return some of their wealth to the crowd, the less affluent and laboring classes who have helped establish the prosperity of the ones in power. Zulu with his costume fur or leopard skin, his diamonds on the buttons of his jacket, his diamond rings, top hat, gold cane and cigar is a burlesque replica of Uncle Sam and must "look big". And the parade tells much about class and racial relations in New Orleans within the society at large and within the black community, with its many divisions of uptown and dowtown Negroes, light or black skin, Catholic and Protestant (one third of New Orleans blacks are Catholic).

If the whole Mardi Gras is a celebration of New Orleans white high society, Zulu by its mere presence in the parades reminds the city that Afro- Americans have their place in Louisiana culture and history. During Carnival, racial relations are no longer ruled by the strict code which assigns blacks their place and space in society; boundaries are momentarily blurred and shifted. On the lawns of St. Charles Avenue black crowds are allowed to sit, watch, picnic, and cheer the floats. The power that crushes so many blacks in the city can be made fun of and put at a distance. More simply, Zulu establishes the right for blacks to share in the revelry, the festivity and the fun and enjoy the Carnival spirit, not only by being onlookers or indispensable entertainers whose various skills as musicians, jugglers, are used to increase the prestige of white pageants, but as full participants entitled to organize their own parade.[5] Zulu offers a dramatic representation of black- white relations; and the Carnival which brings both races together stages at the same time their separateness and their constant interaction. While accepting the role of performers, blacks play with the idea, repeating and reversing the pattern of the minstrel tradition. They take their symbols and motifs from the secrecy of their ghettos and projects out into the public place and their highly stylized and structured performances often dismissed by puritanical onlookers as "savage, licentious or bawdy"[6] are inspired by ancient or current practices based on religious cults, social clubs and longstanding musical and dance traditions.

More elusive than Zulu, the Mardi Gras Indians seem to be more original, innovative and more firmly rooted in Afro-American culture. They are the product, not of social clubs but of "tribes" often seen as street gangs, but with a complex hierarchical and organizational structure, which includes a chief, second chief or trail chief, a wild man, a spy, a flagboy...etc. New Orleans counts up to twenty-five tribes, and membership acquired through rites of passage involves much responsability and grants authority and power in the community. On Shrove Tuesday, the Indians come out of their projects and tenements in resplendent hand-sewn bright coloured costumes which stand in sharp contrast to the gross floats of the other parades. The chief competes with the majesty of the Kings, arms outstretched and bowing to cheers. He is preceded by the Spy, followed by his flagboys, attendants and marchers who form " the second line", dance, sing or merely sway and swing to vigorous drumbeats. They chant in call and response pattern to an intricate accompaniment of instruments and voices. The chief sings his solo line, prayer (usually "Indian Rest" prayer opens and closes the procession) or wild calls and boasts; the second line acts as chorus and refrain .

Ignoring the big parades, the Indians march in the neighborhood, for several hours and miles, making a few stops at taverns, all decorated to welcome them. Occasionally they perform an elaborate ritual of greeting confrontation when they meet a "rival" tribe. These encounters between tribes (the Spy prances up and down the streets, spots and signals the approach of any other tribe) used to be violent and could end up in fights and injuries. The chiefs would have a verbal assault rite to test their determination to fight, war dances would be performed and spears could fly high.[7] This street fighting would help establish the reputation of the tribe and the more violent this re-enactment of tribal warfare, the more respected and feared the winner. Weapons were forbidden in the mid-century after some serious wounding occurred. The confrontation is now performed with fictitious spears by dancing a mock fight around a symbolic line; but the verbal banter is still stylistically very elaborate, and reminds us of the importance of oral assault (as the well-known "dozens") and of "men of words" in Afro-American culture.

Much rivalry still exists between uptown and downtown tribes, Canal Street serving as the dividing line. Intersections of streets become critical moments in the parades, building up dramatic tension, announcing danger and action; whereas the pauses in bars, like intermissions in a show, offer time for relaxation and conviviality and preparation for the final act of the parade where several tribes will actually come together. The serious testing of the enemy's power has become part of a performance, but the competing spirit with all the attending menace is still there. It may be interpreted as another rite of passage in which one proves one's ability to confront the larger white society. [8] The Spy's dance can be very ominous as can the Chief's warnings in words and gestures. Indians are not in the streets to please and flatter and throw beads to admirers, but rather to scare and send warnings and, if some onlookers eagerly seek out the tribes, many still try to avoid these "fiery, wild and rowdy revelers", who chant strange and disquieting songs, perform menacing gestures and arrogantly take control of parts of the city. Each tribe establishes its own territory, mapping out a space which for one single day they declare their domain in a town that in ordinary times yields them little recognition and power. They offer a display of regal splendor totally different from that of the big and more respectable floats, and often surpass in elegance, magnificence and artistry the most elaborate costumes of the other parades. The brightness of their garb and their performance styles fill the street in a way much more suggestive and powerful than the big floats. It helps them hold sway over a neighborhood which is ordinarily grim and depressed; and proves that their imagination and creativity with its improvisational and less legitimate character can match that of the wealthiest and most sophisticated citizens.

The making of the costume may take a whole year and is in itself a whole ritual. It starts as soon as one Carnival is over. Each year capes, headgear -the "drop crown" from head to foot- are disassembled, not to be used again. New costumes are designed and each year has a set colour scheme. Men and women and children come together regularly to do the frills and the bead work which pictures Indian heroes, wild animals or geometric symbolic patterns, while others practice the songs and dances they will perform. Glass beads, sequins, rhinestones, lace, ribbon are used. Much time and money goes into the making of these expensive costumes. These meetings which punctuate the year help build up a sense of community, of responsibility, of common concern for the sharing and perpetuating of ancestral memory, lore and customs, for recreating ritual and imagery whose meaning must be kept secret but alive.

The musical instruments, in contrast with the costumes, seem rather coarse

and are often improvised. Bottles, spoons, cowbells, tinkling metals, rattles, triangles and tambourines can be used, but the music they create has much symbolic meaning and historical resonance. The percussive sound is haunting, reminiscent of the beat of the drum, a magical instrument the slaves cherished, a language unto itself as the expression "talking drums" aptly illustrates.[9] While the other parades make use of military music which is often inspired by European old world tones, the Indian music is a fusion of ritual music used for religious ceremonies by Dahomean, Carib and Choctaw with echoes of West Indian and Latin American sounds [10] as it melds voice and instruments -where word and tone are one- and is accompanied by much body movement, head swaying, hand clapping and foot shuffling. With its beats "as old as ancestral memory", it celebrates the continents slaves have followed from Africa to the West Indies, to North or Latin America, and the rich and complex tradition, "the cradle of jazz" blacks have created in New Orleans, later incorporating the rhythm and blues idiom which became the base of rock and roll music.

The songs are intricate, rich in vocabulary and rhymes and have been passed down orally. The lyrics, which mingle French, Spanish, Indian, African and Louisiana creole dialects, were created in the 19th century. Many are attributed to a full-blooded Choctaw, Eugene Honoré, and have been collected by Jelly Roll Morton and later in 1938 by Alan Lomax. They use the call and response pattern with the chief's solo and the "second line" refrain.[11] Each song is used for a specific purpose, to call members of the tribe, to clear the street, accompany libation, celebrate costume-making, praise courage and endurance ("We won't bow down", "Make no Bow"). Chants, dance, rituals and costumes pay homage to the fighting spirit, the rebelliousness, the resistance, spirituality and pride. They continue an age-old oral tradition, passing on in songs a history of trials, feats, accomplishments and handing down a tribal lore.

The origin of the Mardi Gras Indians is ancient but not well-known. They were first mentioned by Elise Kirsch who noted in Mardi Gras of 1883 the presence of a band of sixty men. For more than a century, blacks have been known to dress as Indians for Mardi Gras. Indians appeared as early as 1847 in the Trinidad carnival (Red, Black and Blue Indians) and have long been present in Haitian and Brazilian carnivals. The first known tribe, the original Creole Wild West of Afro-America, with French and Choctaw heritage, was probably founded in the 1880's in the sixth ward (the idea and the name may have been borrowed from traveling wild west shows), whereas the Yellow Pocahontas were created in the late 1890's. The names the tribes took on seem to mimic the American Indian of the Old West, yet the Indian is not celebrated as just a wild West figure by blacks, but more as a complex culture hero.[12] The choice of Indian ritual and masking is probably rooted in the cultural history of Louisiana, and may have originated with the mixing of runaway slaves and natives Indians.[13] This is a way of acknowledging many similarities between the fate of Indians and blacks who fell victims to much violence and physical and cultural assault, shared the same spirit of endurance, resilience and survival. They had to fight to preserve their ways of life and beliefs. There has also been much mixing and intermarriage as well as formal alliances against a common enemy. Blacks are thus honoring the memory and spirits of Choctaws, Cherokees, Natchez and Seminoles who helped and inspired their resistance against the slave system. The Mardi Gras parade also relates to an ancient custom of communal rites -the cult of spirits, of the dead and of ancestors- and it is only appropriate that the Indian be present in the "procession of spirit figures" where masking helps command the spirits. It is also connected with other occasions where, in the New World, parades were organized for funerals with pre-jazz brass bands.

More significantly still, it may be an extension of older practices, of the famous drum gatherings and dances which started in colonial times -problably around the 1730's- and were later called Congo dances[14] because they took place on the Congo Plains, a landmark in black New Orleans, an important cultural matrix where black dance and music took shape. One found there the same kalinda and bamboula dances as in the West Indies and the music was an amalgamation of West African (Yoruba, Mandingo) and Caribbean beats. Simultaneously, another tradition developed which is still very strong today, that of animist worship and voodoo practices brought by slaves and freedmen who came into New Orleans from Haiti after 1804 -the liberation of San Domingo- and from Cuba after 1809, but also by the Fôn-speaking people of Dahomey. On the Congo Square, surrounded then by swamps and woods, Indians and Afro-Americans met and played sports (ballgames); in the market there, slaves bought spices and herbs from Indians. By 1890 the word *griffon* ("black Indian") appeared. These various encounters and contacts, the similarities between the yearnings and beliefs of the two groups, may help explain why the Indian fired the imagination and became a key figure in some Afro-American celebrations. By masking as Indians, blacks were keeping alive their African heritage and "reinventing a tradition", adapting ancestral ceremonial forms to the realities of the New World.

Edward K. Brathwaite, in his study of West Indian cultures,[15] suggests that the mother culture, in order to survive, must undergo a period of submersion from which it emerges transmuted, with the same root sensibility, but in a new, more acceptable form that will not be threatened by the mainstream culture. The Mardi Gras Indian tradition heralded in the 1880's the emergence of new forms that were to replace the often forbidden Congo dances and the secret Voodoo ceremonies. In a similar way, traditional African religion reappears in many Baptist and Spiritualist churches. In New Orleans, as in the Caribbean, celebrations were often associated with Catholic rituals. They were tolerated as a way of control by church authorities, outlawed or regulated by city ordinances. It is interesting to note that the next celebration after Mardi Gras is Saint Joseph's Day on the 19th of March, an intermission in Lent season. This feast, originally Italian Catholic, is now shared by all nationalities but mostly by Afro-Americans who build elaborate altars in small neighborhood churches, organize masquerades, dances, parties at nightclubs and cafes, and parade in the streets with the Mardi Gras costumes. Saint Joseph's Day, a prolongation of Mardi Gras, when the Indians once again appear on the streets,[16] when church services may last all day, significantly brings together the religious and the secular, shifts the boundaries between intimate and public spaces, blends the cult of saints (St. Patrick, whose feast is two days before, St. Joseph, "Queen Esther", St. Michael...) with that of the Indian spirit (Black Hawk and other cultural heroes also appear on the altars), and establishes a parallel between the stylized decoration in altar-building and in costume-making.[17] Churches and streets are filled with music, song, dance and body movement, frenzy and ecstasy, and the religious music of the spiritualist churches blends with the rhythm and blues of bars and taverns. Both Mardi Gras and St. Joseph's Day demonstrate Afro-Americans' ability to incorporate the Euroamerican feast occasion into their own calendar of festivities, to reinterpret it and in the process develop a distinctive culture of their own.

New Orleans with its unique history, its unique position among American cities as Gulf Coast and Caribbean port and Southern city, its amazingly rich mingling of cultures and flexible borderlines between ethnic communities, was probably a fit setting for the development of complex ceremonial and festive life. The process of creolization has been going on there ever since Louisiana became a

state in 1812, merging Afro-Caribbean, Latin European and Catholic seasonal feasts.

The Mardi Gras became part of a tradition of play and display, of performance, ritualization and code building.[18] It is no accident that Mardi Gras Indians perform on the same streets where jazz emerged out of the brass bands of the Congo Square. A stage for the ritual reenactment of historical memory, the black Carnival connects West Indian music, the slave ring shout, the band marches of Reconstruction time, the music of court dances brought from Europe, the piano ragtime of Mississipi, the early blues, and the first strains of jazz played by Buddy Bolden and his ensemble at picnics and parades in the 1890's. The mask, a privilege long given to whites alone, took on heightened meaning and was used as a tool to confront power relations, to bring subversion and freedom through the breaking of rules, to endow a new identity with the possibility to scare, satirize or delight. The meaning it has for onlookers is not the same as for performers and it is open to a wide range of interpretations as it combines protest, challenge, entertainment, celebration or commemoration. The Carnival turns ghetto neighborhoods into a showcase of ritual theatre whose visual splendor provides a contrast to the "gaudy decadence" of the official Mardi Gras enacted by the city's ruling class.
In this public ritual where performance and stylization play such an important part, the streets become a medium for powerful collective expression and means of communication, the key site for invention and transformation of tradition. One is struck by the way the Carnival finds its expressive forms in the environment and in turn inscribes in it its pulse, music and vivid images and symbols. New codes and vocabulary are constructed, subtle performance rules are evolved that are to govern Afro-American behavior -musical, linguistic and physical- not only on festive days but throughout the year. It sets them free from the constraints imposed by force, law or opinion; it proposes images that can help imagine a different society, shape actions, alternatives and a new sense of identity.

Thus Carnival, a time of freedom and open defiance, penetrates daily life and transforms usual practices. The street environment is an appropriate space for witty and inverted performance and high stylization, "setting up" action deliberately nonsensical and wild, which from this liminal world may provide a threat to maistream society, and serve to strengthen the cultural basis of daily life by pointing up its historical foundations, development and struggles. These festivities, which muster amazing expressive resources exist as responses to the cultural and social ambivalence of Afro-Americans in the world; at the same time as they recount unrecorded or silenced aspects of black history, they offer codes of conduct and knowledge necessary to survival. They demonstrate the centrality of interaction, interpersonal performance and play which all function as countervailing force against subordination in American society.

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Other sources: The Jazz Archives at Tulane University Library, the Louisiana Public Library in New Orleans.

NOTES

1 - According to a law passed by the Crown in 1762.

2 - Friendly and burial societies, lodges and churches were founded, and in the late XIXth century clubs appeared. The Illinois Club founded by a butler in 1890, mostly for servants, then for professionals; the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club in 1916.

3 - Zulu coconut is the most prized of all trinkets (usually beads) of all parades.

4 - Quoted in "The Zulus" by Calvin Trin in *New Yorker*, Feb. 2O, 1964, p. 105.

5 - School bands are used and specially trained for white parades, and the best band of all Mardi Gras is a black band from Saint Augustine school.

6 - Parades and festival which have always existed in black communities have been variously cancelled, dismissed or tolerated, encouraged or dreaded by whites. They have often been the object of curiosity and caricatures. Tolerance in most cases has been used as a form of control.

7 - The exclamation "umba" "will you surrender" is used.

8 - Sometimes the confrontation act is performed with a car which has been accidentally stranded on the Indians' route.

9 - The secret language of the drum through which slaves often communicated was

dreaded by masters who forbade this too African instrument as too subversive.

10 - On a smaller scale, the Mardi Gras Indians evoke many aspects of Trinidad and Rio carnivals. In Marcel Camus' *Orpheus*, the voodoo priest in feathered costume is an Indian.

11 - An often used refrain "Two Way Pak E Way" has been interpreted to mean "t'ourvais bas q'ourvais" "t'as pas de couille" or as a derivation of "tuer". "Tuez bas qu'on est" meaning "kill who is over there", or simply as meaning " I don't give a damn".

12 - Golden Eagles, Wild Magnolias, Wild Tchoupitoulas, Wild Squatodas, Black Eagles, Golden Blades, Red Frontier Hunters.

13 - In 1730, for example, twelve fugitives who found shelter among the Indians prepared a rebellion in slave quarters. Rebellious Indians and their Afro-American allies were slaughtered by the French at Natchez.

14 - Whites always dreaded those drum gatherings and took action to stop the dancing, which was outlawed or controled by city ordinances. The dances were either forbidden or tolerated, but ascribed a certain space and time: they were not to occur outside the Congo Square and only on Sunday before nightfall.

15 - E.K. Brathwhaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica,1770-1820* (Oxford, 1971).

16 - They appear now at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage and the National Folk Festival.

17 - They also combine daylight openly public aspects with most secret nocturnal ones. Many festivities must continue into the night. This nocturnal regime is very important and also more troublesome to whites.

18 - Holidays are always called *play* time by blacks; just as they also use the expression "to play carnival" ("Jonkanoo").