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Ceremonial Textiles of the Mardi Gras Indians

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The appliquéd, beaded, and pieced textile sections or "patches" that are combined to form the ceremonial costumes of the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans, Louisiana are widely considered to be one of the best examples of African-American folk art in North America. Created in secret by black male gang members, these works of indigenous art are rarely seen outside the culturally isolated black neighborhoods.

The black Indian masking tradition sprang from a myriad of African-American heritage and nineteenth century experience in creole Louisiana. The ritualistic combination of dance, music, chanting, and use of ceremonial textiles is still relatively mysterious to the white community. The purpose of this study was to interview masking members of the leading Mardi Gras Indian organizations. With the permission and cooperation of the Indian Council interviews were conducted and actual construction, practices, and presentations were observed. Tribe members were questioned regarding their design inspiration, sewing techniques, work habits, and training related to the actual production of the individual patches, fabric, and suits. It is impossible to understand or truly appreciate the folk art of the Mardi Gras Indians without an informed awareness of the complicated factors that have helped shape, transmute, and inspire them.

In Colonial America the foundations forged in the early Afro-American experience evoked distinctive expressions of a transposed heritage that have remained remarkably consistent and intact. One of the more obscure African -American phenomena to emerge is the Mardi Gras Indian tradition of New Orleans, Louisiana. The Indians have been trivialized by the uninitiated as a colorful costume element of Pre-Lenten celebrations in the city. The "Indian" however, by situation and choice is not easily deciphered. He is not of Native American ancestry; not a part of the official, public, or elite Carnival; not satirical in nature; not part of a rural folk tradition or mainstream religious expression. The Mardi Gras Indian tribes are wrapped in enclosure and yet preeminent in influence within the working-class black neighborhoods in which they exist.

Colonial and Early Creole Culture

The first person of Afro-American descent to arrive in the Americas accompanied Columbus in 1492, and at least two other blacks settled in 1494 in the Spanish colony at Hispaniola. Originally, the plan was to coerce the existing native population to meet the labor demands in the Caribbean, but this approach failed. The native Indian population declined rapidly as a result of mistreatment and exposure to European disease (Palmer, 1992: 66), and the remaining segment was not adaptable to slave labor. A solution long familiar to the Spanish, African slavery, was the next solution as Ferdinand and Isabella granted permission in 1501 for the importation of African slaves to Hispaniola.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the West Indies was the point of sale for legions of African slaves as it served as a transfer point at the end of the Middle Passage. A new, intermediate social group, the Castas, with combined white, black, and Indian blood emerged creating a unique cultural milieu. African slaves in transit to North America were often "seasoned" in the culturally diverse environment of the Caribbean Basin.

As African slaves came into French Louisiana they entered a blended culture in which they were only one of several forcibly immigrated groups. These varying ethnicities were allied by circumstance and common situation. "Desperation transcended race and status, and cooperation existed among diverse peoples in their efforts to escape the colony. Indian and African slaves, deportees from France, including women sent against their will, Swiss as well as French soldiers, indentured workers(engages) fled in all directions" (Midlo-Hall, 1992: 131). Marginalized groups turned to each other repeatedly for support and safe harbor.

In 1729 the Natchez Indians opposed the French appropriation of their sacred burial grounds. It was the 280 African slaves that had been imported to work by the Company of the Indies in the tobacco colony that joined the Indians in their revolt. Although inevitably put down by the French with the aid of the Natchez' arch enemy the Choctaws, the warrior image of the Black/Indian union gained enough repute to lead Perrier to write in 1731, "The greatest misfortune which could befall the colony and which would inevitably lead to its total loss would be a union between the Indian and the black slaves..." (Midlo-Hall, 1992: 183). Fear of such uprisings resulted in the early 1730's of cessation of the slave trade under French rule. The mystique of the mighty Indian/African prowess in warfare, however, was forged.

Labor requirements of the plantation economies accelerated the slave trade; between 1740 and 1810 an annual average of about 60,000 slaves were sent to the Americas. The majority of the Africans sent to colonial Louisiana were Senegalese. Adept tradesmen and artisans they were encouraged to participate in the diverse market economy. The relatively tolerant French view of the parameters of slavery in and around New Orleans endured later Spanish and American rule.

By 1800 the African creole culture was one of six ethnic groups with a sizable creole population. The resulting cosmopolitan atmosphere of New Orleans was far more European than American, more permissive than austere. "African slaves as well as Native American slaves were highly valued in New Orleans and allowed considerable autonomy" (Smith, 1992: 23). In addition to the opportunity for enslaved persons to participate in the marketplace and social gatherings, a large group of free persons of color played a notable role in the economy and society of the city. In 1791 of 2,751 blacks in New Orleans, 41.7% were free, by 1800 of 4,950 blacks, 45.5% were free (Kinser, 1990: 23). Sunday gatherings in the Place des Negres or Congo Square could number 500-600. In 1819 Benjamin Latrobe described hundreds of people performing a circular form of dance, the calinda, to the beat of bambouli drums (Kinser, 1990: 30).

As Anglo-Americans became the majority and controlling sect in New Orleans by the mid-nineteenth century the city became increasingly polarized between the downtown old creole city and the uptown American city with Canal Street the line of demarcation. The median of that wide boulevard is still called the neutral ground. The increasingly discriminatory laws were often compromised by the fact that most black creoles (free and enslaved) lived in the autonomous creole municipal districts created in 1816 where "enforcement of almost all laws was notoriously lax" (Logsdon and Bell, 1992: 207).

During federal occupation of New Orleans after 1862, whole new parameters of economic and social opportunity were opened to the African creole population, but when the troops withdrew in 1877 the Reconstruction backlash and Jim Crow laws had a militantly racist caste.

Benevolent Societies

Ironically, it was not politics in the mid-nineteenth century that posed the greatest threat to the African-Americans of New Orleans – it was disease. To some observers, death appeared to be so common among African-Americans following emancipation that their very ability to survive as free men was seriously debated. The Louisiana Board of Health of New Orleans reported high mortality rates for both blacks and whites, however, the black death rate from 1864 to 1880 fluctuated between 32/1000 and 82/1000 compared to a white mortality rate in the period that ranged from 5/1000 to 32/1000. Life expectancy for a black male was 36 as compared to 46 for white males (Blassingame, 1973: 163). Although charity hospitals and social agencies were in existence, the benevolent societies with roots in the Second Great Awakening at the end of the eighteenth century became mainstream health care systems in late nineteenth century New Orleans. Almost 4/5ths of the local population, both black and white, belonged to such groups in 1888 (Jacobs, 1985: 22). Dues were paid and the members received medical care from society-retained doctors, access to pharmaceuticals, ministrations from the membership, and death benefits. While white benevolent societies organized along ethnic lines; social status, family associations, and religion were more important in the black societies (Jacobs, 1985: 23). Blassingame notes the black benevolent societies also were "the most important agencies involved in efforts to solve community social problems, aid to the sick, a sense of belonging, organizing social life and impressive burials" (Blassingame, 1973: 167). In most groups adult males were regular members while women and children were "passive" members who also received benefits. One expression common to all the black benevolent societies is the ritual parade format. In the funeral parade, the immediate family of the deceased constitutes the first line of mourners, and the sympathetic community and society members form the second line, often thematically costumed. While the funeral celebrates the "true freedom" of death, the parade format is a cultural expression of liberty. Michael P. Smith explains, "Jazz funerals merge church life with street life. They are rites of passage with profound spiritual resonance: more than just burying the dead and celebrating eternal freedom, they serve as a ritual of community affirmation" (Smith, 1994: 30). He also notes, "The Mardi Gras Indians are more than a part of the mutual-aid tradition, they are the prototype" (Smith, 1994: 51).

Religion

Christianity was imposed on African slaves by law via the French Code Noir and the American Slave Code. French Catholicism was superimposed on the patterns and traditions of African (Spirit) religion. It incorporated the aspects of dance, music, magic, medicine, and functionaries, and thus became a medium for African belief systems that in effect "masked Catholic." During the peak of the Caribbean infusion into New Orleans (1809-10), voodooism, the indigenous religion of Haiti, provided many New Orleans slaves with an expression of their heritage and an avenue to power (Williams, 1972: 45). The Spiritual churches of New Orleans, founded by Leafy Anderson have connections to various older religions including Mainline Protestant, folk Catholicism, the Pentecostal Movement, Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism, and Voodoo (Jacobs, 1989: 46). Spirit guides and possession are important elements of the Church. These are symbols of protest and empowerment. A primary Spirit Guide is Black Hawk. He is the spirit of a Native American Chieftain in the Upper Mississippi Valley in the late nineteenth century. Altars are dedicated to Black Hawk and special services honor him. Black Hawk, the "Watchman on the Wall," is closely aligned in the religion to Biblical references of Saint Michael and secular references to Martin Luther King – "the three communicate a clear message of militancy" (Jacobs, 1989: 55). Spiritual possession is a part of masking Indian - a ritual involving prayers for spiritual guidance. "They (Mardi Gras Indians) do not exist to put on a show, but to follow a ritual involving power and pride" (Williams, 1972: 29).

Most individual accounts of a "successful" Indian masking include a sensation of being possessed.

Early Development of Mardi Gras in New Orleans

Carnival societies have paraded in the Gulf Coast Region since 1857. The Mistick Krewe of Comus and the men's social club that supports it, The Pickwick Club, set the elitist mode for the white or "first carnival". It is coded in secret ceremony, but expressed in public display. As civic values related to tourism surfaced, a public role for Mardi Gras emerged. Kinser writes, "Official-culture support for Carnival, the backing of city officials, and even of church groups and welfare organizations are complimentary to elite-culture enthusiasm... it is as clear to the city's politicians as it is to most citizens that Mardi Gras is an unbelievably good commercial investment" (Kinser, 1990: 294). The silent partnership between elite and official sub-groups was cemented in 1872 when Rex was introduced and police and military escort added to the procession" (Kinser, 1990: 295).

Concurrently, the "second carnival" or inversion of white carnival's royal ceremonies surfaced when the Louisiana State Legislature made it legal to mask on Mardi Gras Day "from Sunrise to Sunset." The satirical black Zulu tribe dressed as a parody of white stereotypes of the black "savage." Carnival activity is the sole, seasonal activity of the group. "Zulus make conscious, grotesque use of the white man's racial clichés...but they were never violent, only satirical" (Kinser, 1990: 235). Today they parade along the officially approved parade routes of the first carnival krewes and act as escort to Rex.

Two distinctive neighborhood expressions of the second carnival genre also appeared in the 1880's: the Baby Dolls and The Mardi Gras Indians. Neither have ever been a part of white, official carnival, nor particularly influenced by white society or its conventions. Groups of black prostitutes chose to "strut" on Mardi Gras Day in frilly baby dress costumes and bonnets. Williams notes "Baby Dolls appeared almost a generation before white women began marching in parades" (Williams, 1972: 48).

The Mardi Gras Indians

The Indian masking tradition is used by the black working-class males of the tribes to metaphorically express the "exotically marginalized" position of the Native American Indian and the African American by using mediums of expression deeply rooted in African heritage. Williams explains, "Masking Indian allows the African-American to "safely" call attention to his likeness to the Indian, at the same time veiling from the dominant white culture what he is actually doing – flamboyantly expressing his African ancestry" (Williams, 1972: 87). Tootie Montana, Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas explains, "It was simply a separate thing – Black folks always did different things – the supper, parades, dancing and drumming competitions originated purely out of the black culture – going all the way back to Africa" (Smith, 1992: 74).

In recent years scholars have proposed cultural links to the medieval "wildman", Indian bands in Haiti, and John Canoes (Kinser, 1990: 229). Some have drawn parallels in the challenges, chants, and musicology with rebel groups in Trinidad (Draper, 1973: 11). The same elements certainly existed in the black experience throughout the Pan-American region indicating commonalities would emerge, yet there are few clear examples. In New Orleans creolization of African traditions combined in the late nineteenth century with the realities of Reconstruction, the Native American expulsion , and white supremacist messages encoded in the stories of the American frontier experience and the Wild West Show. In this context, allegiance and affinity of the Blacks and Native American Indians rekindled, drawing on intermixed family associations, mutual opposition to the white establishment, and

collaborative activities in militant stances and covert activities such as the Underground Railroad.

In the 1880's when the oral history of the Mardi Gras Indian begins the first gang "Creole Wild West" was founded by Becate Batiste, a Seventh Ward creole of African, French, and Choctaw descent (Berry, Jason, Foose, and Jones, 1986: 211). The tribes were established as benevolent societies, not social and pleasure clubs, or carnival krewes, and that remains their primary ascription. Traditionally, their only public (neighborhood) appearances are made on Mardi Gras Day and Saint Joseph's Night. The tribes are stabilizing and powerful groups in the black community. The Mardi Gras or Black Indian label is meaningless to gang members. It is the tribe affiliation they affirm – The Yellow Pocohontas, Golden Star Hunters, White Cloud, Wild Magnolias, White Eagles, Black Eagles, Wild Tchoupitoulas, etc. The newly formed Indian Council estimates there are about 32 gangs with an average membership of 10-12 members and additional female and children associates. Basically defined by neighborhoods, cultural and aesthetic preferences vary with the territory.

Challenge and competition in drumming, chanting, dancing, oral-poetry, and costume are the venues through which tribes test each other and gain supremacy. During the fall, Indians practice in local bars and clubs. Each tribe has a hierarchy of assignments for gang members. These include: Wild Man, Medicine Man, Spy Boy, First Flag, Second Flag, Gang Flag, Council Chief, Second Chief, Big Chief, and Witch Doctor. There are also prescribed auxiliary roles for women (Queens) and children that mask with the gang. A complicated, well rehearsed ritual is developed to prepare the gang to meet other gangs in confrontations designed to intimidate and subjugate. Tribe signals and street directions are directed by the charismatic chiefs using a pidgin version of Creole French, English, and African dialect. Prior to World War II, gang confrontations took place largely in an area cleared to build the Superdome called the Indian battlefield or "Bucket of Blood". Tootie Montana recalls, "In my Daddy's day you got your name, not by your costume, but by how bad you were, how violent" (Smith, 1992: 58). Today the rivalry has become one essentially of aesthetics and performance, but the possibility of violence is ever-present. Two of the chiefs interviewed had been shot at practice or on parade and every Indian with which I spoke told me "My Mother didn't want me to mask Indian." Chief Larry Bannock advised, a few individuals still, at the slightest excuse, "spread a tablecloth of blood". The Indians still parade without permit or designated route reminiscent of marron tribes. M. Smith notes "Nothing white is inviolable - unmoved cars are used as dance floors, busses and trolleys must give way. The Indians are coming still is a street cry which sends chills down the back of most downtown people and smiles on the face of those who know" (Smith, 1992: 97).

Costuming

No element is more critical, time consuming, or competitive than the design and construction of a suit for the Indian planning to mask. Basically a three piece ensemble consisting of pantaloons or leggings, an apron or tunic with an elaborate belt, and an enormous headdress. It may also include gloves, foot coverings, a separate mask and hand held accessories. The complicated suit weighs well over 100 pounds and costs several thousand dollars. Each masker designs and sews his own costume in relative secrecy until the finishing phase in which as many as twenty helpers may help with the last minute touches. There are no "professional" designers or craftsmen of Mardi Gras Indian costumes nor would they have a clientele. The emphasis is on personal creation and commitment. Several months are spent turning design ideas or visions into brown paper patterns and cloth. Chief Montana, who has masked for forty years, describes his creative process, "My designs come straight from my head. I sit down and create and sometimes it

takes weeks , cutting up cardboard, doing designs, trying creations, and getting different ideas" (Smith, 1992: 42).

Sewing can occupy four to five hours a day for six months. Integrity and pride are closely related to personal involvement in the design and construction of the suit. Chief Bannock of the Golden Star Hunters advises, "You know what Indians are sewing and what Indians are playing." My own introduction to Chief Bannock was prefaced by his proud display of calloused, needle -pierced fingertips as evidence of his constant beading and sewing.

The cost of the suit is a source of frustration; many cannot afford to mask each year. Johnny "Kool" Stephenson of the Wild Magnolias reveals certain suits may contain \$2,500 of materials with a completed value of \$6,000 to \$10,000. Suits are not repeated or reused. Depending on the tribe location, aspects of the costume or beaded patches may be re-arranged and enhanced in subsequent suits. In other areas no feature of the costume can be repeated. Traditionally the suits are worn only twice, Mardi Gras Day and St. Joseph's Night. With media "discovery" of the Indians in the 1970's, some Indians have the opportunity to participate in shows, exhibits, or Jazz Fest and other suits are used for these "performances". These appearances and costumes lack the significance to the wearer of his Carnival suit, but these new venues have provided a way to help finance masking. Especially significant suits are fashioned into home altars as reminders of a spiritual reawakening.

Distinctive differences in aesthetic expression exist by neighborhood. Uptown, downtown, back of town, and mid-town costume genres have evolved. Smith proposed the source of these differences is rooted in the origins of the various communities: Downtown extractions from the Senegambian colonial importations; Mid-town and Uptown styles affecting the influence of Haitian, American (English-speaking slaves), and Louisiana plantation (creole speaking slaves) immigrations.

Design concepts also follow sectional preferences. Uptown pictorial motifs often feature Western "Cowboy and Indian" scenes depicted in beaded patches arranged in an allegorical manner. The viewer "reads" the "story" from top to bottom. Uptown Indians usually have two suits. Downtown designs are more abstract and three dimensional. M. Senette of the Yellow Pocahontos describes the Downtown suits as sculptural. His goal is to extend and incorporate his person into a larger presence or space (Senette, 1996).

Materials and fabrications also distinguish territorial preferences. Uptown suits are noted for elaborate beadwork "patches" made of thousands of colored beads and small rhinestones. The time-consuming beading process takes months as small denier beads are necessary to the detailed pictorial effects. Three dimensional beadwork in which layers of beading create a raised effect is highly prized. When the suits are dismantled in late Spring, significant patches are used in subsequent years in different arrangements. Wild Magnolias Johnny "Kool" explains, "You reuse your patches every year. You may tear down certain patches and rearrange them. They are supposed to tell a story" (Smith, 1994: 87). Chief Bannock recalls, "When I first started in 1972 all you needed was four patches and now you need twenty-some patches to make a costume" (Smith, 1994: 140). Ribbon and velvet are also commonly featured elements uptown. In all Indian tribes the feathered headdresses or crown with trails is the ultimate expression of both flight and freedom. Uptown crowns are made with ostrich plumes and maribou.

Downtown, the Africanesque tribes use more sequins, mirrors, pearls, and large glass stones. They glue rather than sew the ornamentation. In earlier times, salvaged throw beads, foil from gum wrappers, and dyed egg shells might have been found in the creole

costumes. Downtown Indians prefer feather trims for their elaborate headdresses; Feathers, turkey or other types, are sewn to the crown with a specialized loop stitch that locks the feather but allows flexibility and motion. Cardboard and wire mesh are base materials for the more sculptural forms of the Downtown suits.. Differences in application techniques, sewing conventions, production sequencing, and aesthetic priorities vary by tribe and area.

The twenty four hours prior to Mardi Gras Day for an Indian are often a marathon of frenetic activity as suits are completed under exhausting pressure. Each person interviewed, however, indicated that as he walked into the streets of his neighborhood on Mardi Gras Day in his new suit , the spiritual power felt as others admired his creation took him beyond reality into the spirit world. To be the prettiest or most beautiful is to achieve the highest level of power or self-esteem.

Conclusion

The Mardi Gras Indian history is oral and closely held by choice. Recent interest in the Indians has brought mixed response from the members. While opportunities have expanded to have their creations seen and appreciated by a larger audience, that was never their goal. They have felt exploited by exposure of their culture with no apparent reward to their community. The attempts to explain masking Indian to the world beyond the enclosed neighborhoods have often trivialized concepts at the core of their spiritual being. The Indian Council has made plans but very little progress on a written history of the tribes and the concept of masking Indian.

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