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BLACK INDIANS, ZULUS AND CONGOS; TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSFERENCE OF COMMUNITY TRADITIONS IN NEW ORLEANS AND PANAMA

Elizabeth Rhodes

This paper is a comparative study of three traditions that reflect the African diaspora: the Zulus of New Orleans, the black Indians of New Orleans and the Congo ritual of Panama. In all practices, the participant is transformed from citizen/worker/family member into an empowered being whose role is intricately connected to the reinforcement of cultural and community ties. In addition to presenting an overview of each tradition, I will discuss shared themes, parallel characterization, approaches to masking and comment on the interest of established practitioners to transfer their talents and histories to younger members of the community.

Introduction. I arrived in the Republic of Panama in August 1996 as a Fulbrighter with a grant to lecture at the University of Panama. During the course of the two semesters I spent there, one of my students, Krishna Camarena, in turn became my teacher and introduced me to the Congo ritual of the northwestern coast of Panama. In a relatively short period of time, I seemed to know more about “*los congos negros*” than did the average Panamanian who, in the same breath of acknowledging the Afro-Panamanian tradition, would often comment on the danger of visiting the city of Colon where much of my research took place. Krishna had grown up in Colon when the city had seen better times. She pointed out the influence of U.S. architecture and the balconies that closely resembled the French Quarter in New Orleans. I was amazed and saddened to think that this city which serves as the Atlantic port for the Panama Canal had once been a thriving, prosperous community known by locals as “a little cup of gold.” My reaction paralleled that of Patricia Lund Drolet when she visited the area in the 1970s and observed the contrast between the dilapidated buildings of the nearby village Nombre de Dios with the animation of the people. Drolet states in her dissertation that “the houses in their varied states of lack of repair were a reflection of a society that continued to survive on the decadence that followed a period of relative prosperity” (20).

When given the opportunity to visit New Orleans to search for comparisons between the Congo ritual of Panama and African American Mardi Gras traditions, I was directed almost immediately by Bruce Raeburn, the director of the Hogan Jazz Archives at Tulane University, to resources on the black Indians known also as the black Mardi Gras Indians or simply “Indians,” particularly among practitioners. Without a direct connection to the community as I had enjoyed with my student Krishna in Panama, I spent hours familiarizing myself with the geographic locations so frequently mentioned in writings on the black Indians: Seventh Ward, Muse streets, uptown, downtown, Claiborne Avenue and “under the bridge,” a reference to a portion of Claiborne that had served as “a hub of activity on Carnival day” (Berry 15) until the late 1960s when construction of an overpass that provided an uninterrupted thoroughfare for the interstate severed a sizable community of African American residents. It was not until my fourth visit within a period of five months that I was privileged to enter one of the shotgun-style homes near Claiborne to see and hear about the artistry connected with the life of a Mardi Gras Indian, in this case, Allison “Tootie” Montana who has served as the “Big Chief” of the Yellow Pocahontas for decades.

Although my investigations on African American Mardi Gras traditions led me time and time again to the Indians, it was also necessary to explore the phenomenon of the Zulus, the most visible and historic example of African American participation in New Orleans’ main Mardi Gras parade. In doing so, I was able to add an additional perspective to comparing the manifestation of the African diaspora in Panama and New Orleans.

Panama. The Congo ritual of Panama is an annual festival celebrated by the descendants of African slaves brought to Central America by the Spaniards during colonial times. Commemorating the dry season, the ritual is initiated on January 20th, or San Sebastian Day, during which the victory of the cimarrones or slaves who escaped Spanish domination is celebrated (Camarena 28). The festivities culminate on Ash Wednesday, revealing the integration of the Afro-Panamanian tradition with holidays of the Catholic Church. Performance elements incorporate dancing, drumming, singing and role-playing that reflect the social hierarchy of the Congos. Among the characters portrayed are devils who roam the streets of participating communities. In the evening men, women and children gather around open-air structures known as “*palenques*” to pay tribute to their African ancestors who fled the hardships experienced under Spanish dominance. Performance aspects of the ritual as it exists today have been modified and stylized for public presentations occurring at various times of the year.

New Orleans. The term “Zulu” can refer to one who participates in various activities associated with the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club of New Orleans. This African American organization dates back to the early 1900s when only white krewes were permitted to parade in the city’s Mardi Gras. Due to such racial restrictions, African Americans began parading in their own neighborhoods, and in the case of the Zulus, the central theme behind masking and characterization was rooted in mockery of the whites. Banned from formal balls, they crowned their own Queen and King, the latter sporting a lard can on his head and carrying a banana stalk in contrast to the golden scepter and bejeweled crown of the king of the leading white krewe. By looking minstrelsy straight in the face, the Zulus have created an identity with their blackface makeup, grass skirts and coconut shell favors that are thrown to onlookers.

While Zulu society includes members from a white-collar professional world, and formal dances today are held in the Hyatt Regency or Radisson Hotel grand ballrooms, the black Indians represent the working class African American in New Orleans. Their display of wealth is reflected by the elaborate wardrobe that is hand-crafted each year, and purchase of materials alone such as feathers and beads represents a significant budgetary sacrifice for the practitioner. The greatest impact occurs, however, not as a monetary expenditure but rather as a commitment in time as a result of the artistry and intensive labor that go into design and construction of the head-to-toe suits. In an interview with Jerry Brock, Fi-Yi-Yi Indian Victor Harris states, “A suit like this takes about three months to make. We work on it pretty much every night. I always take off work the month before Mardi Gras to get ready.” (Brock 19) The resulting product as it reveals both expense and time investment, therefore, is ultimately responsible for the degree of respect, and therefore power, commanded by the participant.

The hierarchy of the Indians begins with the Big Chief who is accompanied by lesser characters. Women and girls may mask as well; however, according to Cherise Harrison-Nelson, an active participant in the Guardians of the Flame, their role is primarily to support the men. The Big Chief is recognized as one who excels in leadership as well as sewing and singing the songs which are patterned after call and response. The instrumentation and 2/4 or 4/4 rhythms are distinctly African, with a predominant use of the tambourine. An exception to the even-metered driving cadences is the triple-meter ballad “Indian Red.” Recognized as a prayer among tribes or “gangs,” “Indian Red” is sung on Mardi Gras morning as the Big Chief prepares to emerge from his home where participants and on-lookers have gathered. The procession will then continue from this location until various chiefs meet up. In years past, the potential for violence was high as gangs claimed their turf. Big Chief “Tootie” Montana recalled that this mother would pin a Catholic scapula on his shirt as a form of protection each time he masked. Now, however, the rivalry is expressed through the display of the spectacular feathered suits and headdresses that, according to Alan Lomax, are more African in design than Native American, identifying in particular their often cylindrical shapes.

Commonalities in the Traditions. While each is unique, the above-mentioned traditions reveal similarities in the ways in which participants are transformed from the mundane to another world. This is accomplished through the use of masking, attire, characterization and hierarchies within the constructed society. Within Congo society, for example, there exists a Queen, King (also known as Juan de Dios), “Pajarito,” daughters of the Queen, souls and devils. Additional characters based on professions such as doctor, lawyer, pilot and soldier may appear from year to year. The male Congo wears blackface and, according to Camarena, this represents three ideas. First, black face is a commemoration of African roots. Secondly, it represents the camouflage that the fugitive slave would have worn, and the third reference is to the reverse language employed by the Congo. In times of the Spanish Colonials, slaves used words that could not be interpreted, a code taken from African language along with inventions. As part of the Congo ritual, or “game,” the Congo will say good morning to signify good evening, yes to mean no, and wear black, in this case blackface, as a symbol of mourning when, in fact, he is in a state of celebration. The Queen and her “mininas” do not participate in this aspect of the game and simply wear street makeup to highlight their beauty. With regard to reverse meanings, Maurice Martinez notes a similar pattern within the antiphony employed by the Mardi Gras Indians. He states in his article “Mardi Gras Indians,” that “the invention of a new lexicon that contains hidden meanings known only to in-group members, where ‘inversion’ may be the rule (and where the standard-dominant ‘word’ takes on an opposite meaning, e.g. bad/good) (672)” is one of many examples of southeastern Amerindian/African musical commonalities.

Of all the characters in the Congo ritual hierarchy, the devil goes to the greatest length to alter his identity. Similar to the black Indian, he wears a head-to-toe suit, constructed either from red or black fabric. Shoes may be embellished to include elongated points at the toe-end. The devil wears small jingle bells which warn pedestrians that he is approaching. Each devil constructs his own mask from paper maché and may include objects such as

cow's teeth, horns and hair. Inside the mask, which may be several feet in diameter, the devil vocalizes using animalistic sounds, the entire body taking on the posture of the malevolent character. The local population may know who is behind the mask, but they react with trepidation. Are they simply playing along, or is the tension contagious?

The Zulu hierarchy is similar to that of the Congo, and in addition to the King and Queen, one finds supporting characters such as Mr. Big Shot, dukes and duchesses. In a democratic showing, members of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club elect their officers annually. The first celebrity king, Louis Armstrong, was elected in 1949, and mayors and other leading figures in the community have also been coronated. I asked a female participant waiting for an anniversary parade to begin in front of the Zulu club and souvenir shop on Broad Street what the qualifications were to run for Zulu King, upon which she replied, "Money." Annually, a theme is selected, and smaller groups within the organization plan their wardrobe accordingly. In 2004, the theme was "Birds of a Feather," thus one float of duchesses accessorized their gowns and hair with replicas of owls. Activities in addition to Mardi Gras are held each year, one of the most prestigious being an annual ball. It is a type of coming out occasion during which the monarchs and debutantes are presented. Contrasting with the elegance of those who are presented at such affairs, are the Walking Warriors. This group has, over the years, been the subject of controversy with their grass skirts, Afro wigs and blackface. During the Civil Rights era, in particular, African Americans criticized those who perpetuated the racial stereotype of the "savage native" dating back to 19th century minstrel shows and depicted in Hollywood films of the 1930s, 40s and 50s; however, such criticism was ignored by many who, like the Congos, viewed their wardrobe as commemorating their African heritage. The male Congo who wears a suit coat inside out and places an old rope across his chest diagonally is making fun of the uniform of a Spanish military officer while the Zulu is creating a parody in a one-upsmanship manner of the racial stereotypes depicted by white krewes, particularly that of Rex which first paraded in the late 1880s.

Whether facilitated through the use of makeup, a mask or wardrobe, the participant is transformed and transported from the mundane into the role of leader, protector or community member. "Spy Boy" among Indians parallels "Pajarito" of the Congo ritual. Spy Boy serves as a lookout for the Big Chief of an Indian tribe. The Spy Boy from one gang may have a face-off with his equal from another, each bragging about his chief and setting the scene for their superiors to meet. Pajarito, the term a diminutive of "*pajaro*" or "bird," serves as the lookout for a Congo community, warning of any outsider who may approach. The necessity of a lookout harks back to the times of the escaped slaves when the ancestors of the Congos lived off of the land in the tropical rainforests. Another parallel shows the Queen of the Congo ritual as having the power of the King of the Zulus. Such matriarchal emphasis is reflected by the Congo stipulation that only the Queen and Congo women may situate themselves inside of the constructed area where singing and dancing occur into the night during the period of the ritual. The exception for men is that drummers and those wearing costumes may enter the space or *palenque*. The costumed men are allowed to participate in the courtship dance that is repeated throughout the evening with as many variations as there are participants. Any other man who finds himself inside of the parameters of the *palenque* is subject to being fined by the Queen. Although the importance of men's and women's roles is reversed, the King of Zulu society can be viewed comparatively. He presides over the all-male membership of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club throughout the year. While women organize their own events and participate in parades and balls, they are barred from membership in the club. When asked about this exclusion, one female Zulu participant responded "We don't have to pay dues." I wondered if this was a defense against being denied membership or if exclusion from the club simply was not much of an issue. Regardless, the situation empowers the men in this organization whose King is elected by the membership, and then, in turn, selects his Queen.

Another example of transformation occurs among the Zulu Walking Warriors. Through the use of makeup, wig, skirt, black tights and long sleeved black shirt, the participant is not instantly recognized. Gender differentiation is blurred, and even Anglos may participate. As I met a number of Zulus at their anniversary parade in May 2004, I was invited to join for the year. The Zulu royal court may be limited to African Americans; however, recruitment of Walking Warriors is a good method of raising revenue since all participants must pay for the privilege of participating.

In the working class African American neighborhoods of New Orleans, an escape from the often sordid realities of daily life is healing and empowering. The Mardi Gras Indian hand crafts his suit, spending up to a year on the project with particularly intensive time spent during the last months preceding Mardi Gras, to sew beads, rhinestones, sequins and feathers onto panels that hang from the front of the suit, often in layers. Traditionally, he

will not reveal his suit until Mardi Gras morning. The crown, or headpiece, may be so tall that it may become necessary to first remove it from the artist's home and then place it on his head outside. "Pretty" is a common descriptive term indicating approval or admiration for a well-dressed chief whose costume exhibits superior quality in both design and construction. When a black Indian of any aspect of the hierarchy dons his or her costume, a transformation takes place into the appropriate role with the most significant part to be played by the Big Chief. The respect received from the community becomes manifest in the dignity of the Indian, and the electricity of the occasion feeds the crowd from the neighborhood that will form the famous New Orleans second lines, dancing and singing through the back streets.

Among the black Indians, Zulus and Congos is an avid interest to preserve the traditions. Often the elders will shake their heads in disapproval that the younger generation does not know what the tradition is or how to correctly re-enact it. Indeed, at age 82, Allison "Tootie" Montana came out of retirement as the Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas indicating that he was not in agreement with his son's performance as the chief. An example from the Congo ritual was seen in January of 2000 in the actions of Alejandrina, the Queen from Panama City, who crossed the isthmus to pay a visit to the small community of Cativá. She was instantly afforded the utmost respect, and her grounded and clear dance style was an inspiration to younger practitioners. In the Zulu community, details surrounding the tradition are passed down among the men of the social club who retain the appropriate level of secrecy while the women teach new participants in their branches of the organization about the protocol of formal balls and parading.

There are also concentrated efforts to involve the youth of the various communities. I witnessed a mask-making competition in the city of Colon in Panama as well as a commentated evening gathering where children and teenagers showed off their devil costumes along with posturing and dance movement atop a small stage on the main boulevard. The Zulu society includes its youth by presenting them to society at annual balls. The black Indians have made a formal effort to involve their youth as far back as 1969 with the establishment of the Tambourine and Fan Club. This organization followed the aforementioned construction of the interstate that severed the very neighborhoods that served as the center of black Mardi Gras activities. In a 1982 interview, Jason Berry quotes Civil Rights activist Jerome Smith on the topic of the club as saying, "The stated purpose of the Tambourine and Fan (is) that they shall take the lives of the children seriously, and that educational, economical, recreational and other such programs be developed." Smith adds that the club "stresses a concern for and a consciousness of the drug tragedy that awaits our children." (Berry quoting Smith 16) A more recently developed effort is being orchestrated by Cherice Harrison-Nelson, the daughter of Big Chief Daryl Harrison. Using her skills as a public school teacher and her passion for the community, she has been a dominant force in organizing classes to teach local youth about black Indian traditions. As many Indian practices take place in neighborhood clubs or bars where children would normally be excluded, Harrison-Nelson's method has made a significant impact in educating children about black Indian culture and holding them responsible for the information. She has extended this work to public school projects, including historical, creative and movement components. Aside from such organized efforts, children are included or at least present at Mardi Gras activities in New Orleans, the Congo ritual in Panama, as well as at associated events such as additional parades, festivals and commercial presentations. For example, "Tootie" Montana has made complete suits for his granddaughter who appeared accompanied by adult Indians throughout the day of celebration. In Colon, I witnessed a child who appeared hardly older than a toddler costumed from head to toe in a devil suit as young on-lookers cried out for him move so that the bells around his ankles would ring. "Cascabel! Cascabel!," they shouted with excitement as the mini-devil dropped his weight, held his upper arms tight to his torso and shuffled forward. It is through such observation and exposure to the rhythms and movement of these African-derived traditions that the art will continue to be transferred.

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