

African (SeneGambian) Influences in Louisiana Creole Culture

Shackles of Memory Symposium, African-American Museum / World Cultural Economic Forum / University of Louisiana, Lafayette, October 2008
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The creolization process that blended French, Acadian, Spanish, German, Anglo-American, Native American and African cultures in South Louisiana is evident in the region's architecture, the cuisine, the music, the literature and the language and the oral tradition it expresses. Much of what is wonderful about south Louisiana culture is the result of this rich cultural cross-pollination. The word *créole*, which originally meant simply “native or homegrown, not imported,” served, among other things, to distinguish “esclaves africains” [African slaves] from the more valuable “esclaves créoles” [Creole slaves]. In South Louisiana, where the French language is an important cultural identity marker, French-speaking people of African ancestry often call themselves “Créoles noirs” [black Creoles] or “Créoles de couleur” [Creoles of color] to distinguish themselves from French-speaking whites, who might be either “Créoles français” [French Creoles] or “Cadiens” [Cajuns], as well as from English-speaking people of color who were called “nègres américains” [American Negroes]. Historically African Creoles spoke a French-influenced Creole. Many who live in the old plantation belt along the Mississippi River and on the western edge of the Atchafalaya Basin still speak a version of that Creole. Eventually most of those living on the southwest prairies came to speak a French dialect resembling that of their Cajun neighbors. Today many members of the older generations still speak French or Creole or both, as well as the English they learned in school, while members of the younger generations tend to speak little or no French or Creole.

Thanks to Gwendelyn Midlo Hall’s meticulous historical research on the origins of Africans slaves in Louisiana, we now know that a significant number came from the SeneGambian region on the western African coast. This region was home to a number of nations who are strongly represented among those who were sent to work on Louisiana French plantations, not only the Bambara and the Wolof, but also the Haal Pulaar, the Djula, and especially the Laobé, among others, whose ethnicities my former student Matar Gaye, himself a native of the SeneGambian region, recognized by the names, languages and practices reported in the colonial records. He noticed, for example, that individuals who had identified themselves as Toucouleur or Peuhl or Wolof on the inventory lists had what he immediately recognized as Laobé names (e.g. Diougou). He reasoned that the Laobé who were at the bottom of the social ladder in their native land apparently had taken the opportunity to climb the ladder, given the opportunity to choose their ethnic affiliation in the chaos of the slave trade by identifying themselves as members of the Fulbes whose language they also spoke. As he explored features of Louisiana Creole culture, he found remarkable preservations of Laobé traditions in a number of areas, from vernacular construction to humor.

The various ethnicities from West Africa contributed cultural, social and linguistic elements to the Creole culture that evolved as a result of their being thrown together into the context of Louisiana’s French plantation society, despite the claims of earlier scholars such as Robert Park and E. F. Frazier who maintained that Africans had preserved little more than their pigmentation in the process of becoming African

Americans. This notion was challenged and disproved by subsequent scholars, beginning with Melville Herskovits. Among these, Lawrence Levine demonstrated convincingly the African influences in African-American culture in *Black Culture, Black Consciousness*. William Bascom re-oriented the study of African American oral tradition in *African Folktales in the New World*. Sam Charters explored the African influences in African American music in *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search* (Boston: M. Boyars, 1981). John Vlach has explored the African influences in African American art and architecture in *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* and *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*. These are just to name a few.

In terms of Louisiana Creole society, the current generation of scholars has begun to identify specific influences.

Architecture: porches and shotguns

The African slaves in Louisiana came from a hot and wet climate. Their experience had taught them how to mitigate the effects of heat and high water. Their own vernacular construction efforts featured solutions to these problems that were eventually adopted by the French and later the Acadian settlers in the area. In the cooler climate of France and the downright colder climate of New France and Acadia, for example, radiant heat generated by the sun on outside walls was welcomed. In Louisiana, though, radiant heat was a problem. When we compare the early French colonial construction style found in Natchitoches with the that of early African Creoles in the same community, the differences are striking.

[images]

The porch not only prevented the sun's rays from heating the walls, but created a social space that was cooler due to the lack of exterior walls. This lesson was adopted and became an integral part of what would later be described as French or Acadian style architecture. The strategy of raising houses up on piers to prevent them from flooding also came from African Creoles, and also became an integral feature of French and Acadian houses. African influenced shotgun houses clearly illustrate the cooling effects of cross-ventilation. The windows on French and Acadian houses got bigger and were placed in direct line to achieve the same effect. The French colonial architecture of Sainte-Geneviève, Missouri, indicates clearly that African Creole influences traveled upriver from South Louisiana.

Oral tradition: Bouki and beyond

Perhaps the most obvious example of SeneGambian influence on Louisiana Creole culture is in the name of the traditional foil in Louisiana Creole animal tales. It is well known that Bouki is Wolof for "hyena", obviously from West African oral tradition where the traditional trickster is the hare and the dupe is the hyena. Words sometimes survived the efforts ante bellum planters to eliminate African languages among their slaves, but shifted slightly in the process. No traditional storytellers report knowing the original meaning of *bouki*, yet the term has survived and been extended to cover generally any foolish character or person. Another African survival, *gumbo*, is still used in its original sense to refer to okra, but also has come to mean the soupy dish it is used to

make. Similarly, *congo* came to mean “dark” or “black,” and by extension, “water moccasin,” a snake which is dark grayish brown or black in color, by association with the color of the slaves who came from that area of Africa. The popular song “Allons danser, Colinda,” in which a singer invites a young lady named Colinda to dance with him while her mother is not around, is a borrowing from Creole tradition (Bernard and Girouard 1992). The *calinda* or *kalinda* was an African dance slaves performed despite the interdictions of their masters who considered it lewd and lascivious (Epstein: 30-33). The expression “*Allons danser calinda*” was an invitation to dance the forbidden calinda while the girl’s mother is not around to make the old ladies mad.

Bouki and Lapin stories have been collected in Louisiana by a number of folklorists, including Alcée Fortier (in the late 19th century), Corine Saucier (in the 1940s), Elizabeth Brandon (in the 1950s), and myself (beginning in the 1970s). In the 1930s, Joseph Médard Carrière collected a number of them in the French communities of Missouri, part of the original Louisiana colony, another indication that Creole culture traveled up the Mississippi. But the West African influence in these tales goes beyond the preservation of the dupe’s name. For example, in the version of the tarbaby that I collected from Ben Guiné in the Promised Land, a Creole neighborhood across the Bayou Teche from Parks, the story’s structure is remarkably similar to African versions. In this variant, Lapin, usually the trickster who always wins and is never caught, is trapped by Bouki’s little tar man. Of the many African variants listed by Klipple, only one [Malinke] has the thief escaping the trap by means of his wits: the rabbit is thrown into the dew. In all the rest, the trickster/hare remains stuck. In his Uncle Remus stories (*Uncle Remus*, no. 2), Joel Chandler Harris similarly leaves Brer Rabbit stuck to the tarbaby trap, only to dedicate a whole tale later (no. 4) to his escape. When Ben Guiné left Lapin stuck to the little tar man, all those listening asked why he had ended the tale in this way. He answered with brutal simplicity, “It was time to catch Lapin, you see?”

Le petit bonhomme en coal tar / The Little Tar Man (Wilson Mitchell, dit Ben Guiné, Parks)

Ouais, mais, Bouki té gain un jardin. Li acheté un homme, et fait un petit n-homme en *coal tar* dans le milieu du jardin.

Ah, *well*, Bouki vient, li gardé comme ça-là. Lapin vient, li gardé comme ça-là. Li hélé li, li dit, "Qui c'est ça, cil-là?"

À rien répond pas.

"O!" li dit, "c'est bligé d'être quelque chose de malicieux que Bouki rangé moi," li dit, "M'alé couri apé li, n-homme.

Quand il a arrivé là-là, il sacré gaillard-là un coup de poing. "Cabô!" Ça, c'était les jambes en bas, vous comprends? Li dit, "Moi dis toi lâcher moi, moi té toi!"

C'est comme ça!

"Moi dis toi lâcher moi, moi gain l'autre oui! Moi dis toi lâcher moi, moi gain l'autre, oui! Li piqué un autre coup encore! Li lâchait pas, li resté collé! Li resté collé! Là, li voyé la tête, tout quelque chose resté collé comme ça-là.

Ah ouais, mais Bouki toujours resté en arrière. Lapin sorti devant.

RG: Mais cette fois-là-là, Bouki sorti en avant!

BG: Ouais, mais, li sorti en avant, mais li tient bon li, vous comprends ça? Bien là, c'était temps pour trapé Lapin, vous comprends? C'était passé. C'était temps pour trapé li! C'est pas une affaire, non. Pas jouer avec Lapin, non!

Another African influence on Creole storytelling can be found in the style. The Creole storytellers I recorded were more interested in getting me to understand their stories than in making a statement concerning linguistic purity. Though I had studied the language enough to understand it, the storytellers knew that my native language was Cajun French. Being all more or less bidialectal (Cajun French and Creole), they all made an unconscious effort to Frenchify their Creole in order to communicate more directly and effectively. I am confident that I rendered their words as faithfully and as accurately as I could. However, when I recently relistened to the original recordings, it became clear to me that I had left out an important part of the stories in my transcriptions.

Nearly a dozen Creole storytellers shared stories with me between 1973 and 1979. I was intent on capturing good quality recordings of these stories and tried my best to isolate them so that they would be as uninterrupted as possible. Thinking to honor their stories with a certain formality, I put a tight frame of textuality around them. This included recording as far away from the air conditioner, the refrigerator and the television set as possible. It also included recording them with as few other people around as possible. I also refrained from injecting my own words into their stories, as much as possible. But in the case of Bernice Wiltz, Norris Mitchell, Westley Dennis and Wilson "Ben Guiné" Mitchell, I was sometimes unable to keep other voices out of the performances, including my own. I knew, of course, that audience participation was an integral and expected part of storytelling, especially in the African and Afro-Caribbean tradition. Prompted by my editor and longtime friend and colleague, Carl Lindahl, I included as much contextual and performance information as I could in the presentations and annotations. But I did not show much of these influences in my transcriptions. My student Matar Gaye noticed that there was a difference between what was said and what was transcribed. In his dissertation, he examined the African influences in Louisiana Creole culture. As part of this consideration, I had suggested he take a look at the Creole stories in my collection, and he found a number of thematic similarities between these and the oral tradition he knew from his native Senegal, including the obvious retention of Bouki as the trickster's foil, and a few basic tale types. I pressed him to explore deeper influences, including style, especially in a videotape of Ben Guiné shot by Louisiana Public Broadcasting in 1978, including the body language, the cadence, the musicality of the voice.

[excerpt of Ben]

One of the things Matar noticed immediately was the lack of what he would have considered appropriate audience participation in this Afro-Creole tradition. I had tried dutifully to remain quiet and out of the shot, while Ben was trying desperately to engage me in responding to his stories, asking me over and over, as he always did, "To comprends ça? To comprends ça m'apé dit toi, hein?" tugging at my arms and legs, and breaking out of performance (cf. Hymes) a number of times to comment to me on various issues, such as the nature of the black tobacco that his character was chewing, and even how the film crew was recording his stories when they didn't speak Creole.

When Matar mentioned this, it immediately occurred to me that there might be more to this. I suggested he compare the published transcriptions with the original recordings. When he consulted the Creole tales in the book, he had wondered why there was so little African stylistic influence in them. When he listened to the original field recordings, he noticed that this stylistic influence was indeed there. It was simply not represented in the transcriptions, as a few comparisons of the transcribed texts and the original recorded performances clearly show.

When I recorded Bernice Wiltz in her kitchen in Parks, her husband and a neighbor were sitting nearby. They enjoyed the story and reacted in the way they had always done when Bernice told stories. But when I transcribed the tale later and eventually prepared it for publication, I eliminated the men and focused exclusively on Bernice's performance. What I failed to take into consideration was that everyone in the room was part of the performance. In my annotation to her tale about the contest between the owl and the small bird, I alluded to its apparent African origins, including a reference to a version collected earlier by Elizabeth Brandon in Vermilion Parish, "Le Conte du Moqueur et Hibou" (II, p. 354) which has the birds singing as follows:

Moqueur: Si bi yo ta la la.
Hibou: Kou ta la la
Bin à fenallé ta la la.

I also referred to versions collected by Alcée Fortier in the New Orleans Creole community, "Mamzelle Moquère" (no. 14, pp. 34-36), as well as by Joel Chandler Harris, "The Wise Bird and the Foolish Bird" (*Nights*, no. 66). The songs transcribed by Harris are in a language that apparently represents the remnants of an African language:

Sma't bud: "Tay-tay tenando wanzando waneanso"
Fool bud: "Tay-tay tenando wanzando olando"

Harris himself was convinced of the African origins of this tale. My annotation was based on linguistic and historical-geographic issues. Not only did I not consider the performance or contextual influences, I left them out of my transcription of the tale.

Hibou et z-oiseau / Owl and the Bird (Bernice Wiltz, Parks)

Il n-avait Hibou et pi un z-oiseau en haut un arbre. Et là, c'était-- N-arbre-là té gain un creux. Et creux-là té gain des petits des-vers en dedans. Ça fait Hibou et pi z-oiseau dit, "Mo pari mo ca chanter mieux que toi."

Hibou dit, "O non! O non!"

Ça fait, Hibou commencé. Li fait comme ça "Cou cou tralala! Cou cou tralala!"

Ça fait, il té resté là. Le z-oiseau dit comme ça, "C'est mo kèn tour. Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri!"

Ça fait, chaque fois li té chanté, le z-oiseau té chanté, li té rentré dans le n-arbre. Li té attrapé un des-vers. Ça fait, Hibou continue, "Cou cou tralala!" jusqu'à so la voix-là vini faible. Li chantait un et faisait son cinq ou six fois. En dernier li vini, li té près peut plus chanter. Li dit, "Cou cou tralala. Cou cou tra. . .la. . .la."

Z-oiseau dit, "Mais on dirait toi peux plus chanter."

Li dit, "Non, non, mo peux plus chanter."

Mais z-oiseau t'apé nourri li-même, mais Hibou té pas apé nourri li-même.

Quand ça a tourné garder, z-oiseau recommencé chanter encore, "Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri!"

Quand li fini chanter, Hibou té commencé, "Cou cou tra. . .la. . .la!" et li tombé "Boum!" par terre. Li té plus chanté du tout.

Ça fait, z-oiseau gagné li. Ouais, z-oiseau gagné li.

Here is what actually happened.

[recording of Bernice Wiltz's story]

There is more that meets the ear than meets the eye. A deeper transcription indicates that the responses of Bernice's husband and neighbor were an integral part of her performance. There are other examples of this phenomenon. In a story told by Norris Mitchell about why the rabbit chases the dog, his friend Westley "Kit" Dennis provides the same sort of audience response. My annotation notes that this Creole storyteller uses Cajun French throughout most of the story but reverts to his native Creole dialect in the speech of the animal characters. The transcription does not represent Kit's interaction.

10. Le chien et le lapin / The Dog and the Rabbit (Norris Mitchell, Scott)

Ça, c'est pour le chien et le lapin. Ils étaient des grands amis dans le temps. Ça fait, ils ont été ensemble. Il y a un homme qui les a engagés, les deux. Ils ont travaillé. Ça fait, l'homme les a payé chacun leur chèque. Et ils ont parti.

Ils ont arrivé ayò il y avait une rivière pour passer. Le chien lui dit, "Lapin, comment on va passer sur de l'eau-là?"

Lapin dit, "Mets ton chèque en bas ta queue et puis nage jusqu'à l'autre bord."

Ça fait, le chien le regarde, il dit, "Comment tu dis ça?"

Ça fait, Lapin a fait comme ça. Lapin a mis son chèque et lui, il a mis le sien et ils ont parti à nager. Mais là, il y avait une lame d'eau qui vini. Une lame d'eau qui les a foutus dedans. Ça fait, il a été voir s'il pouvait trouver son chèque mais il était *gone*. L'eau avait pris son chèque.

Lapin était là-bas. Il dit, "Dépêche-toi!"

Ça fait, il a parti derrière Lapin, mais Lapin était sur la butte. Le chien dit, "Tu connais mon affaire? Mo perdu mo chèque!"

"O," Lapin dit, "gros sacré imbécile! Mo dit toi mettre-le en bas to la-queue. Là, de l'eau sé pas prendre ton chèque. Mais," il dit, "ça, c'est une affaire quand même!" Lapin, lui, il a *gone* et Lapin a la queue blanche. Ça fait, Lapin a levé sa queue et puis il a *gone*.

Il a regardé Lapin, il dit, "Tu connais une affaire? C'est lui qui a volé mon chèque!" Et il a parti après.

Et c'est pour ça il course Lapin jusqu'à aateur.

[Excerpt from Norris Mitchell's performance]

Ben Guiné tried for years to haul me into his performances, since I was the only one around while I was recording his stories. He was such a masterful storyteller that he often succeeded despite my best efforts to stay out of them. He knew much more about Creole storytelling than I did.

Music: zydeco and beyond

Because its first language was French or Creole, the zydeco tradition remained a mystery to most outsiders. Native Louisiana Creoles explain that the word comes from *les haricots* because of the expression, “*Les haricots sont pas salés*” [The beans aren’t salty], often heard in traditional songs. The spelling *zydeco* was the first one to appear in print. It was first used by record producer Mack MacCormack to transcribe the sound he heard from musicians in the Houston area in the early 1960s and is the most widespread. Most record companies favor it, including Chris Strachwitz’s California-based Arhoolie Records which released most of “Zydeco King” Clifton Chenier’s major recordings. This spelling comes from an Anglo-American’s attempt to render the flapped [r] in *les haricots*. The [z] sound would then come from the liaison with the “s” of “les” as in *les hommes* or *les hôtels*. Although contemporary French grammar frowns on this liaison because the “h” in *haricot* is now considered aspirate, Cajun and Creole French dialects preserve the former pronunciation of *les haricots* without the aspirate “h.”

So then, what’s in a name? Sometimes that depends on how you spell it, and who’s doing the spelling. Québécois filmmaker André Gladu drew criticism from Strachwitz for entitling his 1984 film on Louisiana African Creole music *Zarico*. Strachwitz maintained that the standard spelling of the term was *zydeco*, and that derivations unnecessarily cloud the issue and dilute the potential for interest. Gladu claimed this was a colonialistic foul and countered with the explanation that *zydeco* is based on superimposed English phonetics, while *zarico* respects the tradition’s own French language connection by using French phonetics to render the term. Ironically, this French connection is the result of an earlier colonial influence. Thus, the politics, not to mention the economics, of culture spilled over into the realm of linguistics. The debate over whether to spell the term according to precedent or to perceived cultural appropriateness continues. This question is complicated further by the recent discovery of apparent African influences that may need to be taken into account.

The explanation that zydeco comes from the expression “*Les haricots sont pas salés*” has generally been “taken for granite” by musicians, record producers and scholars. A collection of traditional Creole music recorded in by French ethnomusicologist Jean-Pierre LaSelve (1980) on Rodrigue, a remote island in the Indian Ocean, includes an intriguing song entitled “Cari zarico,” a group song accompanied by clapping hands, stamping feet, drums and a triangle, with the following verse:

Idée moi, idée toi, Azéline.	I’m thinking the same thing you’re thinking, Azéline.
Cari zarico.	Hot bean soup.
Quand la lune fé séga mouliné.	When the moon dances the séga, we’ll harvest.
Cari zarico.	Hot bean soup.

(LaSelve 1980)

Despite the literal translation, it seems safe to assume that bean soup was not uppermost on the singer’s mind; courtship was. Yet the singers used the expression “cari zarico” as a

repetitive, seemingly unrelated chorus throughout the song. When asked about this, LaSelve explained that singing about beans is part of a musical tradition called “séga zarico” which exists on Rodrigue and several other Creole-speaking islands in the Indian Ocean. The traditional dance associated with this music re-enacts the planting of beans, the woman walking backwards pretending to make a hole with her heel by stamping on the floor, and the man walking toward her placing an imaginary seed in the hole and covering it with his foot. The obvious connection between beans and dance, harvest and fertility rituals among Indian Ocean Creoles suggests that a look beyond the surface of the Louisiana Creole zydeco tradition might prove interesting.

Louisiana Creole and Rodrigue Creole cultures share similar origins and development patterns. They were both colonized by French planters in the 18th century. The first slaves brought to the Indian Ocean islands were not from the nearby East African coast, but from the west coast, the same area exploited for the American slave trade. Both cultures speak closely related varieties of French-based Creole. Both share preoccupations derived from a common heritage, such as the setting sun and the rising moon, stemming from both harvest rituals and ordinances which forbade slaves to be away from the plantation after dark. From Rodrigue, we hear:

Soleil couché, maman, la lune levé, no allé.	The sun is setting, mother, the moon is rising, we go.
O hé, la saison là.	O hey, the season (the time) has arrived.
La saison, la saison, la saison là, no allé.	The season, the season, the season (the time) has arrived, we go.
O hé, la saison là.	O hey, the season (the time) has arrived.

(LaSelve 1980)

and from Louisiana:

O soleil après coucher,	Oh the sun is setting,
O la lune après lever.	Oh the moon is rising.
Mmm, mon nègre est pas arrivé	Mmm, my man has not arrived.
Mmm, malheureux, nègre,	Mmm, unhappy one, man,
O c'est malheureux...	Oh it's sad...
O mais quinze jours passés,	Oh fifteen days ago,
O les promesses tu m'as fait,	Oh the promises you made to me,
O chère amie, mon nègre.	Oh dear friend, my man.
O soleil après coucher	Oh the sun is setting
To connais la promesse tu me fais moi	You know the promise you made to me
Sur un jeudi soir qui passé.	On a Thursday night past.
O la lune après lever,	Oh the moon is rising,
O soleil après coucher,	Oh the sun is setting,

Mmm, là-bas chez Moreau.
O cherche ton candi, nègre...

Mmm, over at Moreau's place.
Oh seek your candy, man...

(Lomax 1934)

In Louisiana, instrumental dance bands play waltzes and two-steps. In Rodrigue, they play waltzes and ségas. In both cultures, they are built around an accordion, a fiddle and a triangle. Since they share so many elements, it is at least plausible that their preoccupation with beans is more than coincidental. English blues scholar Samuel Charters alluded to a similar realization in his book *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search* when, faced with a ceremonial procession in Banjul which looks for all the world like the black Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans, it occurs to him that “To Weh Bakaweh” (a traditional Mardi Gras chant) “must be African, a phrase from one of the languages along this coast, though I was never able to locate it” (Charters 1982: 69).

The languages of West African tribes affected by the slave trade may provide some clues as to the origins of zydeco, though they are admittedly still vague. In at least a dozen languages from this culture area of Africa, the phonemes [za], [ré], and [go] are frequently associated with dancing and/or playing music, most notably among the Yula where “a zaré” means “I dance” (Sigismund 1963) With the cultural and circumstantial evidence enhancing the case, it is tempting to pursue the link between these tribal languages and the proverbial expression concerning unsalted beans. The recurring refrain supposedly about unsalted beans may be built upon older sounds, no longer understood, and now distorted into more familiar, intelligible words, changing the denotation while preserving the connotation.

Levine maintains that “in America as in Africa Negro music, both vocal and instrumental, was intimately tied to body movement” (1977: 16). In South Louisiana, zydeco refers to dance styles as well as the music associated with them. The meaning of the term has expanded (or survived) to refer also to the music, the musicians, the dance, and the entire social event. Creoles go to a zydeco to dance the zydeco to zydeco music played by zydeco musicians. The term is used to exhort dancers, as in the opening dialogue between zydeco king Clifton Chenier and his brother Cleveland on their classic recording of the tradition's title song, “Zydeco est pas salé:”

Clifton: Hé, toi. Tout quelque est correct?

Hey, you. Is everything all right?

Cleveland: C'est bon, boy.

It's good, boy.

Clifton: Tout quelque chose est magnifique, hein?

Everything's wonderful, eh?

Cleveland: O oui. Qui to veux dire avec ça?

Oh, yes. What do you mean by that?

Clifton: Allons les haricots/zydeco, nègre!

Let's z-----, man!

Cleveland: Allons couri à la yé.

Let's run after them.

(Arhoolie 1082)

If zydeco meant only beans, then Clifton's last sentence would not be grammatically sound: “Let's go the beans, man!” Yet neither the late Clifton Chenier nor his Creole compatriots were in the habit of speaking nonsense in their own language. If, however, zydeco is taken to be verb, with “les” being a direct object pronoun, instead of an article,

Clifton makes much better sense: “Let’s zydeco them, man!” or “Let’s go zydeco, man!” One connotation seems to be associated generally with Creole music and dancing. There are many other examples of this usage, such as “Nous autres va zydeco,” “Zydeco tout la nuit,” or in English, “Zydeco, baby!” “Zydeco down!” and “We’re going to zydeco all night long.” Community musicians are described as zydeco kings, queens and princes. Community dance events, which provide the primary opportunity for courtship, are announced as zydecos. Dance events are also referred to as “la-las” or simply French dances, to distinguish African Creole events from disco, soul or rhythm and blues gatherings.

Clifton Chenier’s classic song, recorded in the 1950s, is thought by some to have given a name to this musical style. It is based on “Hip et Taïau,” a French Acadian folksong about two thieving dogs:

C’est Hip et Taïau, [cher],	It’s Hip and Taïau, dear,
Qu’a volé mon traineau, [cher].	That stole my skid, dear.
Quand [ils ont] vu j’étais chaud, [cher],	When they saw that I was mad, dear,
Ils ont ramené mon traineau, [cher].	They returned my skid, dear.

(cf. Whitfield 1939 [1969]: 106)

Clifton’s version continues to tell basically the same story in fractured form, but adds seemingly unrelated bridges ostensibly about unsalted beans:

O Mama!	Oh Mama!
Quoi elle va faire avec le nègre?	What’s she going to do with the man?
Les zydeco est pas salé.	The beans/zydecé aren’t salted.
Les zydeco est pas salé.	The beans/zydeco aren’t salted.
T’as volé mon traineau.	You stole my sled.
T’as volé mon traineau.	You stole my sled.

Regarde les Hip et Taïau...	Look at Hip and Taïau...
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(Arhoolie 1082)

The occurrence of the expression, “Les zydeco sont pas salés,” in the seemingly unrelated bridges of several Louisiana Creole songs from the 1934 collection of Alan Lomax as well as in modern zydeco music suggests origins even beyond its functional folk etymology. In one Lomax recording, Wilbur Charles, a Creole migrant farm worker, concludes an unusual song, again borrowed from French Acadian tradition, about Italians lying in ditches apparently ill from having eaten rotten bananas with the following verses:

Quoi il n-a? Quoi il n-a avec ma femme?	What’s the matter? What’s the matter with my wife?
Ma femme, elle est malade, couchée côté de les vieux Dégos.	My wife is sick, lying next to the old Italians.
Dégos.	Italians.

Les haricots sont pas salés.

The beans/zydeco aren't salted.

Quoi il n-a, mon cher ami?
Quoi il n-a?

What's the matter, my dear friend?
What's the matter?

Les haricots sont pas salés.
O yaïe! O mon nègre!
Les haricots sont pas salés.

The beans/zydeco aren't salted.
Oh yaïe! Oh my man!
The beans/zydeco aren't salted.

Pas mis de la viande, pas mis à rien,
Juste des haricots dans la chaudière.
Les haricots sont pas salés.

Didn't put meat, didn't put anything else,
Only beans in the pot.
The beans/zydeco aren't salted.

(Lomax 1934)

The beans are unsalty because the cook has no meat to add to the pot. Before the days of refrigeration, a common way of preserving meat was to salt it away. Adding this salt meat to sauces, soups and beans provided seasoning as well as protein. "Les haricots sont pas salés," then, may refer to hard times and, by association, to the music that helped to endure them. One is also left to wonder what the singer's wife is doing laying in the ditch with the old Italians in the first place, sick or not. Thus "Les haricots/zydeco sont pas salés" seems also to appear in situations that feature frustrated courtship, or unhappy relationships. In English-speaking African American tradition, this music is called the blues, whether it be a "low-down" blues lament which relieves by purging or a jumping, juking blues which relieves by distracting.

Sexuality is a common feature in African tradition and survives in Afro-American cultural expression. "Jazz" and "rock" which describe other related African-American musical styles originally were euphemisms for making love in the African-American oral tradition. The connection between music and dance and sexuality and courtship may give additional clues to the origins and meaning of zydeco. In "J'ai fait tout le tour du pays," based on the French Acadian "J'ai fait tout le tour du grand bois," the story line concerns another frustrated young lover who cannot visit his sweetheart again because he is poor (his clothes are tattered, his horse is sickly...), but the bridge is a complaint ostensibly about unsalted beans. If one considers that zydeco has possible roots in courtship and fertility ritual music and dancing, however, a possible relationship appears between the bridge and the verses which describe frustration in courtship.

Juré and zydeco may be even more directly linked to courtship and its results. The Rodrigue Island dance tradition described earlier is obviously associated with courtship rituals. In ante bellum Louisiana, part of the planters' systematic efforts to eradicate their slaves' African heritage included outlawing slave dances like the calinda. The pretext that they were lewd and lascivious was not entirely unfounded, however, especially from a European point of view. Descriptions of these dances suggest that they may have been associated with African courtship and fertility rituals (Levine 16; Epstein 30) Contemporary African Creole dance styles associated with zydeco are often considered suggestive, to the say the least, by Cajun and Anglo-American observers. Zydeco lyrics

are often more than suggestive. It doesn't take blues scholars long to figure out the sexual metaphors in such songs as Clifton Chenier's version of the Blind Lemon Jefferson classic, "Black Snake Blues." Nor is there much doubt about the meaning of Canray Fontenot's "Joe Pitre a deux femmes" [Joe Pitre has Two Women], Buckwheat Zydeco's "Give Me a Good Time Woman," Boozoo Chavis's "I'm Going to Dog Hill" ("...where the pretty women're at..."), and Clifton Chenier's version of "I'm a Hog for You, Baby" ("...rooting, rooting, rooting around your door..."). Much of African American expressive culture features double-entendre and sexual imagery, often using foods as euphemisms for female sexual organs (e.g., cabbage, cookie, cake, candy, jelly roll, shortening bread) (Levine 242-243).

From Matar Gaye's dissertation, "La S n gambie et son influence sur la Louisiane cr ole" (2006):

African influence can also be seen in the celebration of Mardi Gras. The dances and the processions one observes in the Louisiana African Creole community resemble the dances of the harvest festival of the *tadjabon* among the Wolofs. I had the opportunity to participate in a Mardi Gras procession in Crowley and the similarities between this experience and the *tadjabon* are striking. Samuel Charters, during a visit to the Senegambia region, had already been struck by the resemblance between African processional traditions and those of the New Orleans Mardi Gras :

By the end of the day I had also been reminded again how clear the links still are between West Africa cultures and the Afro-American cultures of the United States. What was I seeing ? Where had I seen it before ? It was in New Orleans on Mardi-Gras morning in the early 1950s. Suddenly a group of boys came towards me from a corner. Boys and young men singing and dancing the old New Orleans street dance steps. (Charters 68)

Among the Wolofs, the *tadjabon* is a procession in which the men distinguish themselves from the women and the women from the men. Certain liberties are permitted, such as the commission of petty thefts of such things as chickens. The night of the *tadjabon* gives rise not only to traditional feasting during a night characterized by debauchery during which the collective mores are relaxed, which gives rise to more or less tolerated ritual stealing, or to long evening celebrations involving boys and girls, madly dancing and singing. Like the Louisiana Mardi Gras, the *tadjabon* involves age-based rites of passage and group rivalries.

For an example of these similarities, consider one of Louisiana's traditional Mardi Gras songs, whose lyrics have been preserved and transmitted through the generations despite the fact that the exact meaning of the words were long ago forgotten. The power of repetition has preserved the sounds with which we may be able to guess at the words, which seem to have Malink  and Wolof origins.

Iko, Iko
Iko, Iko Andé
Jakamofino Andadé
Jakamofinané

« Iko » in Malinké means I agree, or that's true. It is an interjection that expresses the approval of the listeners following a speech, for example, something akin to shouting « Amen ! ». In this manner, the doubled « Iko, Iko » would mean intensified affirmation. « Andé » in Wolof refers to going forth together, going on a journey together, going with someone. « Andadé » in Wolof refers to going forth together again, journeying together again. « Jaka », « Diaka », or « Tiaka » refers to a divinity who is associated with death and a pre-Christian celebration of the dead. « Mofino » sounds like the Wolof term « mofignow », which means « has arrived. » So piecing these together, « jakamofino » would mean Tiaka or Diaka, the god of death, has arrived. « Finané » or « Fanané » in Wolof refers to passing the night. « Jakamofinané » then would refer to the god of death having passed the night. Putting these together, we get something like :

Indeed, indeed
Indeed, indeed, let's go forth
The god of death has come, let's go forth together again
The god of death has passed the night.

This attempt at reconstructive translation requires the knowledge of two Senegambian languages, Wolof and Malinké. This may explain why the meaning has remained difficult to penetrate. This coincides also with the understandable desire of singers to veil the meaning of their lyrics, to sublimate their message whose references to the cultural heritage of their African origins were strictly forbidden in the context of slavery. The use of two languages may have helped to obscure the meaning of the lyrics, so that, many generations later, the denotation may have been lost to those who continued to sing the sounds as part of their traditional rituals, which preserved some of the connotation. The Louisiana Mardi Gras procession resembles the *tadjabon* dances of the Wolofs, as well as the Malinké *kankurang* profession. These traditional processions take place on the night when, according to Wolof and Malinké custom, the angel of death reigns and those who hope to survive its passing must improvise a way of avoiding it. This is one of the reasons that those in the processions are disguised. It seems altogether possible that such Senegambian traditions could have been integrated and sublimated into the Mardi Gras, with which there are so many overlapping practices and strategies, and which, unlike their own African rituals, was tolerated and even celebrated.

Foodways: gumbo and rice

Often the most subtle cultural expression, the one that flies under the radar, is foodways. We eat what we eat without thinking much about it, unless something calls

unusual attention to this daily affair. During the time that I was working with Matar Gaye, I sometimes cooked for him and his family. When I made a gumbo for him, I knew that the word we use for okra came from Africa. I had not anticipated the extent to which the practice of using this vegetable in a soupy stew was also African. He and his wife both expressed considerable surprise that I had made them a dish from their own tradition, complete with rice. I explained that what I had made was a dish from my own tradition. We began to compare culinary notes and discovered a number of overlaps, including his *soupe au poisson* and my catfish courtbouillon, his *fèves et riz* and my redbeans and rice. He included a consideration of African influences on Louisiana French foodways in his dissertation, pointing out, among other things, the West African origins of our rice staple. Rice has become iconic in Cajun and Creole cuisine. There is a rice and gravy festival. There is even a joke about how a true Cajun can look at a rice field and tell you how much gravy it will take to cover it. Few know that the seeds to plant it, the wetlands agricultural strategies for growing it, and the culinary practices associated with preparing it all come from Africa. In addition to the dish it describes, the word gumbo has come to mean a successful blending of influences. As Matar Gaye pointed out in his study, African influences typically have so successfully been blended into Louisiana Creole culture that it can be difficult to tease them back out, just as when we eat a good gumbo, we are not aware of the individual ingredients that went into making it. Ironically, perhaps, the more successful the creolization process is, the harder it is to identify its contributing parts. It is, however, important to explore our origins in order to celebrate them, giving all of the elements their due.