Festivals in French Colonial America (Barry Jean Ancelet, in the *Encyclopedia of the North American Colonies* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1993)

Though the business of settling and colonizing the North American continent was an enormous and difficult task, the colonial community was not without its pleasures. Humans are profoundly social animals and even on the harsh New World frontier, explorers and settlers managed to find time to celebrate. Many of these early frontier celebrations were simple, homemade versions of Old World cultural expressions and customs brought over in the collective memory of the frontiersmen. Some of these were based on rituals associated with the calendrical cycle, especially the annual renewal rituals which occur in French and western European tradition between the Day of the Dead (October 31) and Easter or May Day. Others were simply celebrations of community and reunion eagerly improvised by *voyageurs* and *coureurs de bois* when they found themselves together for a brief moment.

During the winter of 1606-1607, just after the founding of the first French settlements in Few France and Acadia, even as the first French settlers were struggling to survive the incredibly difficult conditions they encountered in their new homeland, one of the leaders of the Acadian colony, Poutrincourt, established the *Ordre de bon temps,* as first proposed by Champlain, to help lift the spirits of the beleaguering little community. As Lescarbot described the system, "each man... was appointed Chief Steward in his turn, which came round once a fortnight. Now this person had the duty of taking care that we were all well and honourably provided for." (Lescarbot 1911: 342) In addition to providing an occasion of good cheer, the *Ordre de bon temps* also cleverly served to motivate the members of the community to participate in the provision and preparation of quality meals by making a ritual out of hunting, fishing, cooking and eating. Everyone involved felt responsible for the maintenance of this improvised festival. Lescarbot noted that

> there was no one who, two days before his turn came, failed to go hunting or fishing and to bring back some delicacy in addition to our ordinary fare. So well was this carried out that never at breakfast did we lack some savoury meat of flesh or fish, and still less at our midday or evening meals; for that was our chief banquet, at which the ruler of the feast or chief butler, whom the savages call Atoctegic, having had everything prepared by the cook, marched in, napkin on shoulder, wand of office in hand, and around his neck the collar of the Order, which was worth more than four crowns; after him all the members of the Order, carrying each a dish... (343)

The festivity of these events contributed to the social and physical well-being of this fragile community, creating an esprit de corps while helping to prevent such maladies as scurvy (by then the settlers had discovered how to make spruce beer) and malnutrition.

Similar, though less formalized practices in the rest of New France served similar purposes. *Voyageurs* and *coureurs de bois* found occasions to celebrate the moments when they found themselves gathered together. These *rencontres* or *rendez-vous* were typically celebrated with ritual feasting as stores and providence would allow, and animated with songs and stories. Eventually many of the songs and stories they had from their European French tradition were adapted to reflect the realities of their new surroundings. The wide-open frontier, where just about anything seemed possible,

fostered the development of a strong tall tale tradition based on fantastic hunting, fishing and farming stories, featuring incredibly abundant game, fish and crops. Songs also began to reflect such colonial features as a new flora and fauna and especially the long winters in songs such as “La Plainte du coureur de bois”:

Vraiment l'hiver est long.	*The winter is truly long.*
Le printemps ennuyant,	*Longing for the spring,*
Nuit et jour je soupire,	*Night and day I sigh*
C'est de voir ce doux printemps,	*To see sweet spring,*
De voir ce doux printemps	*To see sweet spring*
Celui qui reconsolera	*That will console*
Ces malheureux amants	*These unhappy lovers*
Avec leurs amours fort loins...	*Whose loves are so far away...*

(trad.)

Contact with the native Americans also provided for festive occasions as trappers and settlers alike observed and eventually joined the local tribes during their ritual ceremonies. Le Page du Pratz, for example, described the yearly cycle of moon-oriented festivals among the Natchez:

> The Natchez begin their year in the month of March, as was the practice a long time in Europe, and divide it into thirteen moons. At every new moon they celebrate a feast, which takes its name from the principal fruits reaped in the preceding moon, or from animals that are then usually hunted. (Le Page du Pratz 1774; 1941: 319)

The most elaborately described of these Natchez moon celebrations was that of the Great Corn, with singing, dancing, improvised folk drama, and a ritual feast. Contact with such native American festivities provided entertainment and socialization for French Colonials, especially during the earliest years in New France where French explorers and settlers were drawn to tribal cultures. Missionaries whose goal it was to convert the Indians to Christianity frequently complained that the French instead were being converted to heathenism by the Indians. Daniel Usner, Jr., described the festive atmosphere which could hover around colonial contact with native American tribes, again among the Natchez:

> For some time Canadian voyageurs and missionaries had been visiting the Natchez, whose gatherings around French camps looked to Father Du Ru 'like one of our ports in France, or like a Dutch fair.' (Usner 1992: 28)

European settlers did not arrive in the New World without pagan-influenced rituals of their own. As Iberville and his party of explorers were going up the Mississippi River on March 3, 1699, they noticed it was Mardi Gras, an annual festival which they knew from their own French tradition. As Tassin and Stall described the events:

> Iberville declared a Mardi Gras celebration; his men sang and drank wine and, according to legend, flirted with some Indian women who happened to be in the vicinity. (Tassin and Stall 1984: 19)

Mardi Gras is, of course, the day before Ash Wednesday on the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar. Evidence from several French American communities from Louisiana, up the Mississippi Valley through Missouri to the Illinois country, across the Great Lakes to Quebec and over to the Canadian Maritime Provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince-Edward Island and Newfoundland indicates that there was a pattern of similar questing or mumming traditions occurring during different parts of the year from New Year's Day through *Mi-Carême* (Mid Lent). In many parts of French North America, this New Year renewal ritual was called *la guillannée.* Rosemary Hyde Thomas described it as "a cohesive symbol of the old French culture that once flourished everywhere in the French settlements of Mid-America" (Thomas 1979: 179). *Guillannée*, popular in the Ste. Genevieve district, Vincennes and the old Illinois country (Egan 1990) and at least as far as Québec, was essentially a French mumming tradition and included many of the features often associated with the French *fête de la quémande* such as mock begging, improvised drama and ritual role reversals. Groups of ten to twenty participants, all male, often disguised with reversed coats, red scarves, blackened faces, with stockings over their heads and sometimes in Indian or voyageur garb or colonial finery, visited two or three dozen households during the day, performing a traditional questing song and dancing in exchange for refreshments or money. They could be accompanied by musicians, especially a fiddler, and *la fille aînée,* one of the men dressed as a woman. The song, as reported by Carl Ekberg, Thomas and others, described some of the events of the ritual:

Bonsoir le maître et la maîtresse	*Good evening, master and mistress*
Et tout le monde du logis!	*And to everyone else who lives with you.*
Pour le premier jour de l'année	*For the first day of the year,*
La Guignolée nous vous devez.	*You owe us La Guignolée.*
Si vous n'avez rien à nous donner	*If you have nothing at all to give us*
Dites-nous le!	*Tell us of it right away.*
Nous vous demandons pas grand'chose	*We're not asking for very much,*
Une échinée	*A chine of meat or so will do.*
Une échinée n'est pas grand'chose	*A chine of meat is not a big thing,*
De quatre-vingt dix pieds de long;	*Only ninety feet long.*
Encore nous demandons pas grand'chose,	*Again, we're not asking for very much,*
La fille aînée de la maison.	*Only the oldest daughter of the house.*
Nous lui ferons faire bonne chère	*We will give her lots of good cheer,*
Nous lui ferons chauffer les pieds	*And we will surely warm her feet.*
Nous saluons la compagnie	*Now, we greet your company,*
Et la prions nous excuser.	*And beg you to forgive us please.*
Si l'on a fait quelque folie	*If we have acted a little crazy,*
C'était pour nous desennuyer	*We only meant it in good fun.*
Une autre fois nous prendrons garde	*Another time we'll surely be careful*
Quand sera temps d'y revenir	*To know we must come back here again.*
Dansons la Guenille, dansons la Guenille, dansons la Guenille!	*Let us dance la Guenille...*

(Ekberg 1985: 321)

This closely resembles the questing procession common in rural French Louisiana and associated with the Mardi Gras. There bands of masked participants roam the countryside collecting the ingredients for a communal gumbo to be prepared and eaten in the evening before a masked ball which traditionally lasts until midnight when Ash Wednesday opens the Lenten period of fasting. A similar song described similar events:

Capitaine, Capitaine, voyage ton flag.	*Captain, Captain, wave your flag.*
Allons se mettre dessus le chemin.	*Let's get on the road.*
Capitaine, Capitaine, voyage ton flag.	*Captain, Captain, wave your flag.*
Allons aller chez l'autre voisin.	*Let's go to the next neighbor.*
Les Mardi Gras se rassemblent une fois par an	*The Mardi Gras gather once a year*
Pour demander la charité.	*To ask for charity.*
Ça va aller de porte en porte	*They go from door to door*
Tout à l'entour du moyeu.	*All around the hub*.
Les Mardi Gras viennent de tout partout,	*The Mardi Gras come from all over,*
Ouais, mon cher bon camarade.	*Yes, my dear, good friend.*
Les Mardi Gras viennent de tout partout,	*The Mardi Gras come from all over,*
Mais tout à l'entour du moyeu.	*Well, all around the hub.*
Les Mardi Gras viennent de tout partout,	*The Mardi Gras come from all over,*
Mais principalement Grand Mamou.	*But primarily from Grand Mamou.*
Les Mardi Gras viennent de tout partout,	*The Mardi Gras come from all over*,
Tout à l'entour du moyeu.	*All around the hub*.
Voulez-vous recevoir	*Do you wish to receive*
Mais cette bande de Mardi Gras?	*This band of Mardi Gras?*
Voulez-vous recevoir	*Do you wish to receive*
Mais cette bande de grands saoulards?	*This band of great drunkards?*
Les Mardi Gras demandent la rentrée	*The Mardi Gras request permission to enter*
Au maître et la maîtresse.	*Of the master and mistress*.
Ça demande la rentrée	*They ask for permission to enter*
Avec toutes les politesses.	*In all politeness.*
Donnez-nous autres une petite poule grasse	*Give us a fat little hen*
Pourqu'on se faise un gombo gras.	*So that we might make a rich gumbo*.
Donnez-nous autres une petite poule grasse	*Give us a fat little hen*

Tout à l'entour du moyeu.	*All around the hub.*
Donnez-nous autres un peu de la graisse,	*Give us a little fat*
S'il vous plaît, mon caramie,	*Please, my dear friend,*
Donnez-nous autres un peu de riz,	*Give us a little rice,*
Tout à l'entour, mon ami.	*All around, my friend.*
Les Mardi Gras vous remercient bien	*The Mardi Gras thank you kindly*
Pour votre bonne volonté.	*For your generous good will.*
Les Mardi Gras vous remercient bien	*The Mardi Gras thank you kindly*
Pour votre bonne volonté...	*For your generous good will.*
	(trad., in Ancelet 1989: 5-6)

Other versions of the Louisiana French Mardi Gras song mention *la fille aînée* and the intention to heat her feet, just as in the *guillannée* song. Though collected recently, we now know the songs and events associated with the country Mardi Gras to go back to medieval France and even earlier, indicating that something similar bridged the time between now and then, including the colonial period, though there are few direct references to the ritual and no descriptions.

In addition to liturgical or calendrical festivals, daily life in the French colonies eventually included festive occasions. Ekberg described such occasions in Ste. Genevieve, based on a variety of reasons, from the visit of an traveling salesman: "The entire day was probably a festive occasion--with much eating, drinking, and a dance in the evening" (323); to weddings: with "festivities [that] went on until well into the night" (323-324). Further, as towns developed on the frontier, they invariably included drinking and gaming establishments which provided festivity on a daily basis, to the consternation of local missionaries. Ekberg mentioned an abundance of taverns and billiard halls in Ste. Genevieve, and bars, music halls, and houses of prostitution figured prominently in most descriptions of early New Orleans. Settlers throughout the Mississippi Valley and up into New France also regularly eased the strain of daily work by meeting at night with their family and neighbors to play music, sing and tell stories, sometimes until quite late in the evening.

The consistency of certain folklore features, such as ballads and folktales (Ancelet 1984; Carrière 1937; Lacourcière and Low), as well as the questing festivals, would seem to indicate that there was continuity throughout these far-flung regions of French North America, which on one extreme bordered on the arctic and on the other, on the tropics. This festivity, which often caused the French settlers to be described as frivolous especially by their Anglo-American observers, was also an important expression of the cultural continuity which gave the new residents of Louisiana and the Illinois country (where they were influenced by their African, Spaniard and German neighbors), New France and Acadia (influenced primarily by their Scottish, Irish and English neighbors) a sense of community and identity and a way to survive the hardships and tedium of daily life on the frontier.

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