

Tradition and Change in Contemporary Cajun Culture

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From the very beginnings of what became the serious study of folklore and traditional culture in the 19th century, the notion of tradition among those who were observing and studying it tended to be reflective of how things were told or sung or made or done in the past. Some early folklorists were even called antiquarians. But the people who were telling and singing and making and doing traditional things have had a much more functional notion of tradition, an active one that is determined by an ongoing process rather than a product that is the result of the way things were done in the past. Contemporary folklorists have learned from the folk that their idea of tradition is a much more useful and accurate one, representative of how tradition actually functions. In this presentation, I would like to explore a few case studies from the context of Cajun and Creole Louisiana, which expose this understanding of tradition as an ongoing, cultural evolutionary process.

In an article in *Harper's Weekly* from 1866, A. R. Waud described the Acadians of Louisiana as ignorant and unambitious. Mr. Waud had little more than disdain for the Acadians. He observed, "These primitive people are the descendants of Canadian French settlers in Louisiana; and by dint of intermarriage they have succeeded in getting pretty well down in the social scale... Without energy, education, or ambition, they are good representatives of the white trash, behind the age in everything. The majority of all the white inhabitants of these parishes are tolerably ignorant, but these are grossly so... To live without effort is their apparent aim in life, and they are satisfied with very little, and are, as a class, quite poor." (Waud, qtd in Brasseaux 1992: 101) According to another 19th century observer, Albert Rhodes, "They detest innovation, and the steam plough and the few-fangled sugar-houses are not in favor. To adopt them involved outlay, risk, much thinking and fretting. It is simpler to give them wide berth, and digest well by day and sleep well at nights. This is Acadian philosophy..." (Rhodes, qtd in Brasseaux, 1992: 102-103).

These extraordinary portrayals run directly counter to the way that Cajuns have been described by other observers with deeper knowledge of their culture. The Acadians and their descendants the Cajuns have been nothing if not innovative. As historian Carl Brasseaux notes, the French settlers who became the Acadians learned quickly in their new frontier context to depend only on their own efforts (Brasseaux 1987). They were the first European settlers in the New World to vote, filling what was essentially a power vacuum produced by a lack of *seigneurs* and clear governmental and ecclesiastical authorities. They arrived in what is now Nova Scotia between 1632 and 1680 and already by the 1650 census several heads of household ran the census takers off telling them the information they were seeking was none of their business. With their colony punted back and forth between England and France until 1713, they learned to ignore what colonial authority there was on both sides, continuing to trade with New France while under English rule and with New England while under French rule.

The Louisiana Cajuns, heirs of this fierce sense of independence, have continued to depend on their own self-sufficient strategies for survival in their

Nouvelle Acadie (Brasseaux 1992, Ancelet 1991). A tight social co-op system enabled them to survive by networking the community's resources. Cooperative *boucheries* provided fresh meat regularly to community members before refrigeration. They fused French and Spanish cooking strategies with African Creole influences and native products to produce a new and widely respected culinary tradition, of which Paul Prudhomme and Emeril Lagasse represent only the tip of the iceberg. *Ramasseries* gathered community members to bring in a sick neighbor's crop. Barns and houses were often raised by a gathering of neighbors and family members. The styles of those barns and houses were adapted, with influences especially from African-Creole neighbors, to respond to the conditions of the subtropical climate. Benefit dances gathered contributions for those in need. It is with this sense of social cooperation that Cajuns responded to the call for help in the destruction caused by hurricanes, including Audrey, Betsy, Hilda, Juan, Lily and Katrina. More recently, according to Henry and Bankston, "Many authors note the evolution from marginal rural settlers to well-integrated, productive members of a modern society" (2002: 71). Jim Bradshaw wrote in a local newspaper editorial, "And lots of Cajuns are doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants, even college professors. You'll find Cajuns selling shoes at Sears, running gasoline stations, driving taxis, flying airplanes, working at chemical plants, operating computers, stringing telephone lines, raising crops and cattle, delivering the mail and running restaurants... doing the same things as people everywhere" (qtd in Henry and Bankston 2002: 71). Recent books by scholars such as Carl Brasseaux and Shane Bernard and films by filmmakers such as Pat Mire, Glen Pitre and Charles Richard describe and examine the actual complexity, innovation and industry that are characteristic of Cajun culture and society.

Cajuns have continued to invent and innovate their material culture, developing new specialized boats, traps, sorters, peelers, and flash-freeze-driers for the crawfish industry. They have improvised and retooled into existence endless varieties of cooking contraptions, including the so-called Cajun microwave smoker, and any number of steamers and boilers and barbecue pits and grills and deep fryers mounted on outdoor kitchen tables and pickup truck beds and trailers, as well as improved oyster knives, shrimp peelers and fish scalers. They have invented land-leveling planers for use in their rice fields, multi-key accordions and literally thousands of adaptations and improvements to oilfield equipment. This innovation takes place not only in academic and engineering labs, but also in machine shops and welding shops and personal workshops through Acadiana.

Which of the following pairs is the more traditional?



Too often, history and tradition are confused. History of course is the record of what happened in the past. Henry Glassie defined tradition as “the creation of the future out of the past.” (Glassie 1995) Cajun music and community scholar Dewey Balfa put it this way: “Tradition is not a product, but a process. It’s like a tree. One must water the roots so that the tree can support new growth. Both are critically important.” When this process, a deft blend of conservative and innovative forces, is working at its best, it results in the improvisation of new forms that both surprise us and reassure us at the same time. We experience them for the first time, but recognize clearly where they come from. In one sense, Louisiana’s Cajun and Creole cultures have survived on the margins by resisting change. In another, they have thrived on the margins based on a surprisingly strong sense of identity, and on a clever survival strategy that incorporates and integrates change. If we have survived more or less well, it may be because we have learned to negotiate the margins by constantly adapting and innovating solutions to the pressures from the dominant cultures in our contexts.

This spirit of adaptation at the heart of our tradition is evident in any number of cultural and social expressions. Consider the contemporary evolution of Cajun house types and foods, such as porches and peppers, both of which reflect ongoing input from our constantly evolving context. So-called Acadian houses feature practical responses to the drastically different climate found in South Louisiana by the newly arrived exiles, the most important of which were inspired by African

Creoles. Houses were made drier and cooler by raising them off the ground on piers; porches kept the sun off the outside walls and provided breezy outdoor living space; and windows and doors were designed to provide as much cross-ventilation as possible within the simple living spaces of early houses. Some of these features have become stylized in what are now considered and called Acadian-style houses. Sometimes the Acadian connection is only nominal, as Cajuns live in townhouses, apartment complexes, trailer parks and ritzy subdivisions.

A faulty notion of tradition would limit Cajun cuisine to ingredients and practices from a time before refrigerators, supermarkets and innovative cooks.

It is ironic that some of the most iconic foods now associated with Cajun culture, gumbo and rice and gravy, both owe their existence in Louisiana to African Creole culture. Today these have become completely integrated into what we consider our traditional culture. A popular joke suggests that a true Cajun is someone who can look over a rice field and determine how much gravy it will take to cover it. And gumbo has often been used as a metaphor for the cultural blending process that has occurred in South Louisiana. This process of creolization is responsible for the houses we live in, the foods we eat, the stories we tell and the music we dance to. The term Cajun is useful to describe the results of this creolization on Acadian culture. And this process continues to produce new culinary innovations, such as crawfish eggrolls, crawfish tamales, microwave roux, and some things that strain the imagination. And all the while, we can also enjoy hamburgers and fried chicken with iced tea and Dr. Pepper, without feeling that we are betraying our Cajun-ness.

A faulty notion of tradition would freeze styles and practices in Cajun music in a supposedly ideal, golden age.

Folklorist and Newport Folk Festival fieldworker Ralph Rinzler eventually became director of the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife. He and Dewey Balfa locked horns over the issue of tradition and change in what proved to be a remarkable illustration of that Dewey Balfa's understanding of tradition as process, rather than as product. For years, Balfa tried to convince festival organizers to allow him to come with his current band as he performed in the dancehalls every Saturday night, instead of only as the stripped down Balfa Brothers. He eventually won a partial victory, coming with most of his dance band, but he was not allowed to bring along his steel guitar players. The argument was that the steel guitar was too modern, an inappropriate and inauthentic addition to the traditional Cajun music instrumentation. Never mind the fact that Dewey Balfa, long recognized as a pillar of cultural preservation in America, chose to perform weekly with a steel guitar in his band, just as dozens of other Cajun bands did. In 1978, he finally confronted Smithsonian festival personnel on the issue, asking them, "Are you trying to present Cajun music as you wish it still were, or as it really is?" He was allowed to bring along fiddler Dick Richard who also played a few tunes on the steel guitar that year.

The Mamou Cajun Music Festival is one of the oldest continuously running celebrations of Cajun music in South Louisiana. Inspired by the visits of folklorists Harry Oster and Ralph Rinzler, Mamou natives such as Paul Tate and Revon Reed began to organize events to feature what they understood to be traditional Cajun music. Their focus on traditionality and authenticity led to the development of rules concerning what was appropriate for their festival. In an attempt to be true to tradition, they banned styles and instruments that they felt to be too modern and thus inauthentic. Only a few years ago, Cajun musician R. C. Vanicor, who has played steel guitar with host of groups, including the legendary Iry Lejeune and his Lacassine Playboys, was told that he would not be allowed to perform on the steel with Ray Abshire, who was being honored at their festival that year and who had invited Vanicor to be a part of his band. He was told that the festival's purpose was to preserve and celebrate "traditional" Cajun music, and that the steel guitar was not appropriate to that tradition. In fact, the steel guitar was not appropriate only to their notion of tradition, which was stuck in an idealized historical past. The flap caused such a stir that Paul Tate, Jr., son of one of the festival's founders and currently one of its organizers, called me to ask my opinion on the subject of tradition. I told him essentially what I'm telling you here today, that it is a mistake to confuse history and tradition, that treating tradition as a product instead of a process can produce an "authentic-like" (or "fauthentique") reflection of a by-gone period instead of a truly authentic reflection of contemporary culture, and that referring to history is an easy way out, enabling us to avoid paying attention to what is actually happening in real time. In recent years, festival organizers have widened their perspective to include more contemporary expressions of Cajun music, including steel guitar players.

A faulty notion of tradition would preserve the racial segregation that was long customary in Cajun dance halls.

The limits and direction of the creolization process were clear in the matter of the desegregation of cultural venues. Some pushed for change, while others needed to be dragged along kicking and screaming into the future. In the 1970s, members of the current generation who had followed the civil rights movement were delighted to discover Clifton Chenier in Creole clubs such as the Blue Angel and the Bon Ton Rouley. When I went to the Blue Angel with a few friends in the early 1970s, I remember that we were the only white people for many blocks. This was certainly not unheard of. Whites have attended black clubs in lots of places from Harlem to Storyville. But these were troubled times. There was ongoing tension in the community over the lessons of coming together at the water fountains, on the buses and at the lunch counters. Yet the prevailing sentiment in the club was repeated by almost everyone, "Don't worry about anything, baby. Everybody's welcome here. You won't have no trouble." I realized later that we were perfectly safe there because unlike Cajun dance hall patrons, those Creole patrons were not interested in enforcing barriers. They seemed delighted instead that barriers may be coming down. It is also undeniable that it would have been disastrous for something to happen to us in that club.

Meanwhile, however, the inverse was not true. Not long afterwards, a black bus driver was turned away from the Triangle Club in Scott as progressive Cajun musician Zachary Richard played inside one hot Sunday afternoon. The bus driver wasn't even trying to penetrate the social event or test the color barriers. He had simply driven a busload of French tourists to the club and was looking to wait inside where it was cool. To his credit, Zachary Richard declined to continue playing when he heard what had happened. He went on to clearly state his repugnance for the blatant racism displayed there that afternoon. But the line that had been drawn exposed the racist, exclusionary standards that ran deep in the community. This occurred not in the context of ante-bellum slavery nor in the Jim Crow segregation of the 1940s. This was in the 1970s, when black and white children were finally going to the same schools, when few really noticed anymore who sat where in restaurants or on buses. Yet the dance hall, which has long functioned as a primary setting for courtship within traditional Louisiana French society, remained as closed as the schools, lunch counters and polling booths once had been.

During the 1970s, Clifton Chenier broke through some of the local color barriers, playing at white dance halls such as Jay's in Cankton and Willie Purple's in Lafayette to enthusiastic crowds without incident. But Clifton had a policy, even in Creole clubs, of never taking a break. He never left the bandstand, not even to go to the restroom. Perhaps the reason he never had trouble was because he never tried to penetrate the social activity of the clubs he played. On the other hand, during the 1950s and '60s, swamp popper Camille Thierry (Cookie of Cookie and the Cupcakes who had a major regional hit with "Mathilda") was threatened and even beaten more than once for pursuing relationships with white women. He and the band played black and white dances, as did many of the emerging rockers, such as Fats Domino, Little Richard and Chuck Berry. But it wasn't Thierry's playing that got him in trouble; it was his crossing the courtship color line.

These barriers continued to erode, in the same direction at first, then both ways in certain places. A few Creole dance halls eventually began to attract mixed crowds. Hamilton's and the Bon Ton Rouley in Lafayette began by having an open night, generally on Wednesdays, that attracted a mostly white crowd to these primarily Creole places. Later, there developed several restaurants that also programmed Cajun and Creole music on a regular basis. There, too, Cajuns and Creoles, as well as visitors from all over, gathered to eat, dance and socialize. The restaurant setting seemed to mitigate the socialization/courtship factor. As Cajun music and zydeco became increasingly hip during the revival years in the 1970s and '80s, a few dance halls emerged where both styles were presented to mixed audiences. The Liberty Theater in Eunice, associated with the Jean Lafitte National and Historical Park, deliberately began programming Cajun music and zydeco on the same nights, attracting both Cajuns and Creoles into the theater and onto to the little dance floor at the foot of the stage. This cross-cultural experiment had its delicate moments. Some Cajuns expressed concern about the possibility of mixed couples dancing there. It eventually happened and those that couldn't deal with it didn't come back. Danny Poulard, a light-skinned Creole musician who had grown up in Eunice, confessed to feeling powerful emotions about coming back from his adopted San Francisco to perform there. He explained that, in his youth when the Liberty

was still a movie theater, he was denied access at the front door because he was too dark, and that he was also denied access at the back door because he was not dark enough.

But throughout those years of change, the old-time Cajun music dance hall remained a bastion of segregation. In part, the reason for this is that, with rare exception, Creoles have shown little interest in attending such places. The public places that were important, schools, restaurants, movie theaters, modes of transportation, have all been integrated. There was little pressure by the Creole community on the Cajun dance hall, except in isolated cases like the Triangle Club incident in Scott, and as late as 1996, at La Poussière in Breaux Bridge. There again, an African-American was turned away at the door. As it happened this time, she was an attorney from Chicago in Louisiana for a convention, and she brought a civil suit against the owners. The case attained some local and national notoriety (NPR's Daniel Zwerdling did an in-depth report on the situation). But even then, it was not clear that this would finally break down the color barriers in the region. While Cajuns, especially young Cajuns, seem to be keenly interested in zydeco, few Creoles express interest in Cajun music. Though both are open-air and open to all, typically the annual Zydeco Festival in Plaisance attracts lots of whites, but the annual Cajun Music Festival in Lafayette attracts few Creoles. The U. S. Attorneys working on a settlement of the La Poussière case expressed an interest in exploring innovative solutions that may bring the two cultures together beyond this isolated case. Interestingly, the success of the Corner Bar experiment in the same town, spearheaded once again by Zachary Richard, predated this case by at least ten years. But things eventually can change, if the players are not stuck in history. Fast forward to today, Creole musician Geno Delafose, has become a regular at the same La Poussière that got into trouble enforcing its antiquated segregation policy in the 1990s, as well as a host of other Creole musicians in a host of other historically Cajun dance halls and venues.

A faulty notion of tradition, one that confuses it with history, would preserve racism and segregation in the Mardi Gras.

I am now going to examine the recent developments in a Cajun Mardi Gras run to explore the issue of evolution within the context of tradition, including the strategies that were part of the process of change.

The Grand Marais Mardi Gras, under the leadership of *Capitaine* Thomas Deshotels, elected to eliminate black paint from its palette beginning with Mardi Gras 2018. The group recently ran into several difficult experiences occasioned by the blackfaced characters in the group, those called *paillasses* who enforce ritual floggings as part of their performance strategy. One, in Lake Charles where they had been invited by someone in the tourism industry who apparently was not fully aware of the group's traditions. They were supposed to give a demonstration in full dress for a tourism group meeting at a casino there. When organizers met them at the door and saw the blackface characters, they turned the group away and cancelled the demonstration. And during the 2017 Mardi Gras season, on Saturday when the group joined the afternoon parade in Jennings, someone took a photo of

paillasse Myron Wayne Landry in full blackface. The photo was posted on FaceBook with a comment to the effect that racism was obviously alive and well in Jennings. Myron Wayne was distraught at being characterized a racist – he insists he is not – but he was also adamant that he would not let this pressure change what he considered to be a critical part of his tradition. He appeared on the run the following day again in full, even more intense blackface.

These two incidents apparently provoked a crisis of conscience among some key members of the group, including *Capitaine* Thomas Deshotels, who have been struggling with the issue for several years now. Mike Heinen and Wilson Dean Landry (Myron Wayne's brother), both longtime members, and I have been discussing the problematic nature of blackface and the equally problematic terminology that often accompanies it (*nègre, nigger, etc.*) for over two decades. As early as the last two tenures of former *Capitaine* Wallace Gary, going back to the 1990s, he was already pointing out the likelihood that something would have to give in this regard. He was the first *capitaine* to outlaw the use of the terms *nègre, nigger* and even *black*, insisting on the use of the historical term *paillasse* to refer to the group's whip-wielding enforcers. He also occasionally presaged within the group that their blackface tradition would eventually cause them serious problems with the public and the press, as the group attracted more and more attention. (As is often the case, Mardi Gras practice reflects real-life issues. Wallace Gary himself struggled for years before eventually accepting his own bi-racial grandson, the child of his daughter and a Creole man from the community.) In 2014, a few of us left the run early in silent protest of a resurgence of this offensive terminology, likely a blowback reaction to the Obama presidency. We later explained to *Capitaine* Thomas why we had elected to abandon the run before the end. The following year, he made it absolutely clear in a rousing speech at the beginning of the run that any use of these inappropriate terms would not be tolerated. “And this is not a three-strikes-and-you’re-out situation,” he challenged the group. “If I hear it one time, you’re out. And if you don’t believe me, try me!” he bellowed. We did not hear those words all day. We felt that it was worth the effort to try to change things from the inside, and we felt that things were indeed shifting, if ever so slowly, in the right direction.

The decision to eliminate what some consider a critical part of their Mardi Gras heritage did not come easy. Some argued that conceding to the press and outsiders would be a violation of their tradition. The notion of tradition is indeed at the very heart of this conflict. *Capitaine* Deshotels and others who were increasingly convinced that something had to be done to avoid a firestorm of criticism were also conflicted by what seemed to be an abandonment of “how things had always been done.” Undoubtedly apocryphal stories had developed to explain the blackface, especially the one that claims that the characters commemorate a time in history when slaves were allowed to be in control for a day and whip whites.

The relationship between history and tradition turned out to be a key element in the solution that *Capitaine* Deshotels eventually found to resolve the problem. In several of our talks over the last two years, I suggested that there was a difference between history and tradition, that history is what happened in the past and that tradition is an ongoing process, undoubtedly influenced by the past, but not

trapped in it, in the spirit of Henry Glassie's definition of tradition as "the creation of the future out of the past." (Glassie 1995: 393) I pointed out that resistance to change of any sort does not make sense, given the fact that many changes to this Mardi Gras run have indeed been made over the years. Many years ago, there was no wagon to accommodate those who did not have horses. Then they started using one. Years ago, the wagon was pulled by mules. Now it is pulled by a tractor. *Capitaine* Deshotels agreed, chiming in with more changes that he had observed. Years ago, live musicians provided music along the run. Now a sound system blares music from cds or a radio broadcast. Years ago, the run took place over three days, in Jennings on Sunday, in Lake Arthur on Monday, and in Grand Marais on Tuesday. Now the run covers two days, in Jennings on Saturday and in Grand Marais on Sunday, with only the dance and gumbo in Jennings spilling over to Tuesday night. These and other changes have been made for a number of reasons, but especially to accommodate changing realities such as demographics, economics, work commitments, and convenience. So why not a change to accommodate changing social realities and community dynamics?

Armed with this reasoning, *Capitaine* Deshotels called a meeting of the group and proposed eliminating blackface. He argued passionately that he was not doing this to hurt the Mardi Gras by abandoning one of its historical elements. He insisted that he was doing this for precisely the opposite reason, to save the Mardi Gras that he so dearly loves. He spoke through tears and suppressed sobs, saying that without this necessary change, their Mardi Gras was doomed to vilification, ridicule and a potentially uncertain future. He added that he could see only two possible reasons for resisting this change. One is that black is just a color and not a racist statement, so why should it matter. But if it is just a color, then changing that color if it is jeopardizing the tradition should not matter either. The other is that the blackface is indeed a racially loaded statement, and if that is the case, then the need to change is even more urgent.

Many of the current *paillasses* were in attendance. Most of them are in their twenties and early thirties. Most came into the meeting aware of the *capitaine's* plans and had obviously given this issue considerable thought. Some responded that they do not oppose the change, pointing out that they have grown up, gone to school and now socialize with Creole members of their community. They said they do not have a problem with the elimination of this feature that is clearly offensive to some of their neighbors and friends, even if that is not the intention. Some even added that they would welcome participation from Creole members of the community. Others allowed that they do regret losing what they feel is an historical feature of their tradition, but agreed that keeping it is not worth the potential damage to their Mardi Gras. Only one *paillasse*, ironically the one who had been vilified in social media, declined to go along. He walked out of the meeting just as it was getting started, obviously feeling betrayed and doubling down, declaring that he could not accept what he considers an attack on his tradition. He did not stay to hear any of the reasons that were brought up to support the change.

The discussion then turned to the practical matter of how to effect this momentous change. Having accomplished his goal of eliminating black paint, *Capitaine* Deshotels shrewdly deferred to those most affected by the change to

decide how to implement it. He asked the *paillasses* what they thought they should do. Perhaps wear another color? If so, which? The *paillasses'* role in the run makes it necessary that they be easily visually distinguished from the rest of the group, so they will all have to adopt the same strategy. Also, choosing another color for themselves would eliminate that color from the palette of the *soldats*. Someone pointed out that, if the intention is to avoid offending ethnic groups, they should probably avoid yellow and red as well. The discussion had some light moments, typical of this group's uncanny ability to incorporate carnivalesque play in the handling of serious community issues. Someone jokingly suggested that blue would only offend the Smurfs. They discussed blue, purple, and green. They also discussed the possibility of no paint for the *paillasses*, in the spirit of *co-capitaines* in other Mardi Gras who wear no masks, which has the dual function of distinguishing them from the masked participants and making them recognizable and thus responsible to their hosts. The Grand Marais *paillasses* had not yet decided what the new strategy would be. In keeping with this group's penchant for imagination and improvisation, we would likely only discover the solution when they formed up to run on Samedi Gras in Jennings. It would not be black, but whatever it would be, they would likely make it work and it would look like it were the most natural thing in the world.

So, the South Louisiana Mardi Gras run with arguably the most racially charged appearance would be one of the first to confront the racist implications of blackface. And they would do it within the context of the carnivalesque, which once again would provide a stage on which to play out the community's very real social issues.

Samedi Gras, when the Grand Marais made its traditional run within the city limits of Jennings, the *paillasses* appeared without painted faces. They had opted among themselves to enact the elimination of blackface by wearing no paint. They would be identified as *paillasses* only by their burlap *blouses* and their braided burlap *quoits*. According to reports from the group, the day went without incident. In fact, no one mentioned the lack of blackface at all. As I had anticipated, it was almost as though this was how they had always done it. Perhaps typical of carnivalesque play in a sense, this momentous change was inaugurated by pretending that there was nothing to it. Anyone who came to observe the run expecting to confront the blackface characters found themselves without an opponent. On the other hand, there may have been other observers who were upset at what they may have perceived as the loss of a critical part of the tradition. Yet no one heard anyone complain. Perhaps there was less opposition to this important social change than one might have thought. Within the Mardi Gras group, only one *paillasse* had voiced opposition to the change. Numbers may have been similar in the community as well. Things were going almost too well.

Then, the morning of *Dimanche Gras*, the day of the Grand Marais country run, the process hit another gear. Several veteran *paillasses*, including Blaine Landry, Johnathon Navarre, Logan Pickles, Ryan Gary, and Lane Williams, who had successfully run without blackface the previous day in Jennings, all laid down their *blouses* and *quoits*, thereby abdicating their positions. They announced that they wanted to run as *soldats* instead. They invoked the theme of this year's Mardi Gras,

that change was not only possible, but necessary, referring to the group's decision, under the leadership of *Capitaine* Thomas Deshotels, to eliminate blackface among the *paillasses*. Initially, I thought this may have been in protest of the change, but it turns out that it was instead an intensification of the play, a raising of the stakes for reasons that became clearer only later, as the day evolved. The veteran *paillasses* explained that, in the context of this new movement to change, they were taking the opportunity to show some of the rowdier *soldats* what it was like to act as enforcers. *Capitaine* Thomas Deshotels was taken aback by this move. He had to immediately choose a new set of *paillasses* from among the ranks of the *soldats*. Suddenly Jessy Lejeune, Brett Bolles, Trey Herndon and Andrew Fontenot found themselves promoted to *paillasses*. One veteran *paillasse*, Josh Williams, did not switch over, and Timothy Gary, son of former *Capitaine* Ed Gary and a former *paillasse* himself, was also pressed into service, ostensibly so that there would be at least some experience among the group.

The new *paillasses* did the best they could, learning about this other side of the play as they went. They were obviously having trouble anticipating what to watch for, where to position themselves, and how to control the play without ruining it, among other things. Their troubles were compounded by the fact that the veteran *paillasses* were very experienced in how to play, having run as *soldats* before they were promoted to *paillasses*. But they too seemed to be having some trouble staying in their new roles, having to fight the instincts they had developed over the years to ferret out trouble. On several occasions, they commented on problematic situations they saw developing before realizing that this was no longer their responsibility. Blaine Landry, one of the long-time veteran *paillasses*, actually broke into a run toward trouble that was brewing before he caught himself, realizing not only that it was not his responsibility, but also that he didn't even have a *quoit* to deal with it. Even the song, which is about dwindling drinking resources, fell apart on several occasions, without John Young's gestures to direct the chorus through the bottle, the full glass and the dregs. *Capitaine* Deshotels complained on one occasion that the group had gone through three bottles in the song before getting to the full glass.

The new recruits eventually got better at performing as *paillasses*, remembering some of the tricks of the trade from previous experiences on the receiving end, and factoring in the experience they were acquiring on the ground. They got better at maintaining order, but they were still obviously straining in this new role. The vets insist that they were having fun as *soldats*, but they too were obviously uneasy. Just before the end of the run, with two houses left to visit, some of the vets met secretly with the new recruits and offered them a deal. They would take back their *blouses* and *quoits* and switch places with them. This would have two significant effects. For one thing, everyone would be back in the roles in which they felt most comfortable and effective. In addition, the vets negotiated a concurrent deal with *Capitaine* Deshotels. They would reassume their roles if he guaranteed them a full pardon for the entire weekend, eliminating the possibility of his whipping any of them at the Tuesday night dance. *Capitaine* Deshotels was visibly relieved to have his veteran enforcers back on the job, and agreed to the deal. Since the switch happened before the end of the day on Sunday, the new recruits who

were resuming their roles as *soldats* would also be exempt from any whippings by the *capitaine* on Tuesday night, as they would no longer be *paillasses*. Only the *capitaine* can whip the *paillasses*.

It is interesting to consider the consequences of these changes in the context of the deep play that has long been at the heart of this Mardi Gras community. The basic principle of *charivari*, which is closely allied to the Mardi Gras in the carnivalesque, was invoked to challenge the order by ridiculing it and calling attention to the disruption in the social order before eventually restoring and ultimately legitimizing it. In this case, instead of a quirky marriage, the typical focus of *charivari*, it was the elimination of a longtime tradition. Typical of *charivari* strategy, the group did not deal with the change directly. Throughout the two days of the run, the issue of blackface was not overtly mentioned once. Instead, this major shift in tradition was dealt with indirectly, and the group instinctively knew that the newly paintless-faced *paillasses* had to be the ones to do it.

First, by abdicating their roles on Sunday morning, the veteran *paillasses* effectively destabilized much of the day. Without a strong containment structure, the *soldats'* play was tentative, for fear of fatally disrupting the order. The former *paillasses* felt this even more keenly than the other *soldats*. Coming up through the ranks, they all were expert players, but they found themselves needing to hold back a bit to avoid overwhelming the new recruits. In addition, there were several real-life factors that also likely contributed to these events. The group lost three veteran members during the year. John Young, long-time *paillasse* and mentor of the group, passed away a few months before Mardi Gras. Guy Mallet, another long-time *paillasse*, had withdrawn from the group earlier for reasons having to do with the tensions produced by the blackface that the *paillasses* previously wore. And Myron Wayne Landry, a third long-time *paillasse*, had withdrawn in protest over *Capitaine* Deshotels' decision that the *paillasses* would no longer wear blackface. In the face of these challenges, the survivors did what they have often done when under duress. Under the guise of playing off of *Capitaine* Deshotels' commitment to change, they acted to put the ritual in jeopardy within the context of carnivalesque play in order to extract a commitment of solidarity from all players to preserve its integrity.

The commitment of the group to preserving the play got them through most of the day Sunday. When the veteran *paillasses* switched back to their rightful roles toward the end of the day, dependable, solid order was reestablished. They come out of the wagon sporting their *blouses* and *quoits* and strode quickly and confidently into the group, taking clear charge and demanding an orderly circle. "The *capitaine* said fall in," one yelled. "Come on. Y'all make a good circle. The circle hasn't been right all day," another one challenged. Everyone snapped into position. The circle was sound. Some of the *paillasses* were once again patrolling the perimeter; others took command of the interior. *Capitaine* Deshotels smiled and said, "Now we're back right." The last two house visits were boisterous, energetic and hilarious. Everything seemed to speed up. Hard play was again possible within the once again reliable edges. The intensity was dizzying. *Capitaine* Deshotels asked me to stand and provide the gestures that the late John Young used to provide to guide the song. "Now listen," he noted, "even the song is right." Everyone was smiling and laughing, clearly relieved that the game had survived and happy that

everyone had recommitted to it, in fulfillment of Bakhtin's observation that "...festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts." (1984:92) Or as Turner put it, "...ludic behavior is pressed into the service of the ultimate aim of the ritual..." (1982:32), The Grand Marais Mardi Gras confronted their own demons with carnivalesque play and festive laughter.

During the dance on Tuesday night, the restored order prevailed. All but one of the *paillasses* avoided retribution as the *capitaine* honored the deal they made. Timothy Gary sacrificed himself by popping *Capitaine* Deshotels with his *quoit* during a presentation by some of the Grand Marais group for visitors at the Liberty Theater in Eunice on Monday. Since this happened on Monday, the weekend exemption did not cover it. He knew that this would give *Capitaine* Deshotels the opportunity he would need to preserve the tradition of having at least one *paillasse* whipped to close the evening.

The historic change of eliminating blackface from their practice was clearly the underlying force at the heart of all of this, and in the end, it was assured, precisely by those who were wearing none for the first time. They also showed that they could survive the loss of their veteran leaders. The *paillasses* who had masterminded and orchestrated all of this were all in their twenties and thirties. They proved that they were capable of carrying the banner, even under the most adverse conditions that they themselves had generated. It was a brilliant coup that succeeded in confirming the order by flirting with disorder. As Turner put it, "...ludic behavior is pressed into the service of the ultimate aim of the ritual..." (1982:32). Essentially, the Mardi Gras saved itself by playing well according to the rules of its own misrule. The players also saved their Mardi Gras, enabling it to proceed into the future, by realizing that their tradition is a living one, in which change is not only possible but necessary to its very survival.

Obviously, the issues of class and race and social power are not all resolved. And I haven't even mentioned other critical issues, such as gender and sexuality. Members of the power structures of society, such as politicians, business leaders, and educators, continue to address social issues and reform in the form of laws and civic projects. But meaningful social change must also be addressed on festival stages, Mardi Gras runs and trail rides, in dance halls, restaurants, kitchens, welding shops, rice fields and back porches. And if our notion of traditional culture is not trapped in the historical past, then it can and will nudge us all forward in ways that even the recalcitrant can't ignore.

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