

3-1-2001

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Recommended Citation

Ware, C. E. (2001). Anything to Act Crazy: Cajun Women and Mardi Gras Disguise. *Journal of American Folklore*, 114(452), 225-247.
Available at: http://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/8260

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Anything to Act Crazy: *Cajun Women and Mardi Gras Disguise*

As women play an increasingly prominent part in many Cajun Mardi Gras runs, they bring their own styles of roleplaying and masking to the celebration. A handful of creative women have taken the lead in commodifying the rural tradition, making and marketing Mardi Gras suits and masks on a large scale. This article looks at Cajun women's disguises as a way of understanding their larger influence on the festival.

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN RURAL Cajun Mardi Gras celebrations is the presence of female maskers. Women once were limited to the sidelines; in Tallant's words, the "olden carnival was primarily for men and horses" as its "impromptu wildness . . . had no place for the ladies" (1976:67).¹ Now Cajun women run Mardi Gras in about half a dozen prairie communities, although they are excluded from many more (Lindahl 1996b; Ancelet et al. 1991). In some places, three generations of women have played the role of costumed *Mardi Gras*, as revelers are called. In others, they more recently founded their own Mardi Gras runs or joined formerly all-male events. Women also are active in children's runs in Eunice, Basile, and Iota.

Women's influence on Cajun Mardi Gras disguise has been especially pervasive; they often design and sew not only their own costumes but those of husbands and sons. Years ago maskmaking was a male art, but now many female Mardi Gras create their own masks each year. Today, women make more masks for men than men do for women. A few women handcraft masks on a large scale and have taken the lead in marketing them throughout south Louisiana and beyond. Georgie Manuel, Suson Launey, Renée Frugé, and Jackie Miller are among the region's most prolific mask-makers, their inventions worn by dozens of men, women, and children each year.²

Disguise is important on practical and symbolic levels in the rural Cajun celebration. Masks and costumes—even if they do not always provide real or consistent anonymity (see Sawin this issue)—free Mardi Gras celebrants to act in new ways. As Renée Frugé of Tee Mamou says, "Whenever you put the mask on, it's so different. You can act the fool, and [neighbors and friends] never know who it is" (1995).³ At the same time, the disguises women make or choose are creative expressions, a form of cultural commentary that allows the Mardi Gras to cross—or maintain—a variety of social boundaries.

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This article examines disguise as a measure of women's influence on the Cajun Mardi Gras tradition. Focusing on Tee Mamou and Basile—two communities where women have run Mardi Gras for twenty-five years or more—I look at local conventions for “dressing out,” symbolic devices and meanings for costuming, and the ways that creative women are forging new directions for community Mardi Gras traditions.

I was first introduced to the Tee Mamou women's run in the fall of 1988 through a grant-funded documentation project. Organizers of the Iota-Tee Mamou Mardi Gras Folklife Festival wanted to research Acadia Parish folklife in general, and prairie Cajun Mardi Gras traditions in particular, in order to develop programming and interpretation for their festival. I was hired as the more junior of two project folklorists, and the festival director scheduled a series of interviews with members of various Cajun runs—past and present—for me over the course of three months.⁴ Although I had yet to see a Mardi Gras run, I was spellbound, especially when the Tee Mamou captain mentioned the local women's run. During an interview with three of the women's run's founders, they suggested I try running Mardi Gras myself in Tee Mamou in February. My experience of masking that year, and again in 1992, convinced me that running Mardi Gras is indeed an art and that I made a better follower than clown. Since that first year, I have returned to Tee Mamou for Mardi Gras every year but one to document the women's Saturday run and occasionally portions of the Tee Mamou men's Tuesday run.

In 1991, Carl Lindahl and Barry Ancelet—both of whom had already spent many years documenting Cajun Mardi Gras runs throughout southwest Louisiana—introduced me to Helena Putnam, one of Basile's most skilled Mardi Gras. Helena smoothed the way for me to talk with captains and other women Mardi Gras there, and has generously shared her own deep understanding of the Basile run over the years. Now the Basile run is also a fixed part of my yearly calendar.

My fascination with the prairie Cajun Mardi Gras celebration, and especially with women's roles in it, led to a dissertation and eventually a coauthored book (with Carl Lindahl) on maskmaking. I return to the area several times a year for Mardi Gras planning meetings and other community events, interviews, and visits. Frequently I have worked with members of both Mardi Gras associations on public programs such as festival performances and demonstrations.

My discussion of Cajun women's disguise traditions, then, is based on interviews with captains and Mardi Gras (female and male) in Tee Mamou and Basile over the last dozen years, my own observations of these community runs, and the far more extensive experience of colleagues and fieldwork mentors like Carl Lindahl and Barry Ancelet. Historical information—photographs from the *Basile Weekly* newspaper, home videos, and family photos—has also been helpful.

Community Traditions of Cajun Mardi Gras Disguise

Most Cajuns will tell you that the most traditional or “original” Cajun Mardi Gras disguise is a wire screen mask, a pointed hat known as a *capuchon*, and a multicolored two-piece suit.⁵ This image, now an emblem of the celebration as a whole, is repeated in various ways throughout the Mardi Gras season—in painted plywood figures decorating

front yards, souvenir posters and tee shirts, newspaper graphics, and costume jewelry. Many prairie Cajuns consider this combination to be uniquely and distinctively their own, despite the fact that some Creoles in the area wear similar costumes in their Mardi Gras runs (Spitzer 1986).

The classic costume may be the stated ideal, but it is by no means the only—or even the preferred—choice for many Cajuns. Most community runs feature a wide variety of disguises, with “modern clowns, monsters, and cartoon characters” (Ancelet and Edmunds 1989:3) in wigs and plastic masks alongside those wearing screen masks and capuchons.⁶ Costuming choices are both highly individual and bound by community expectations; personal and localized ideals often differ from this general Cajun standard.

A few community Mardi Gras associations spell out what they consider appropriate disguise. Others allow more latitude, but all have limits. Just as “each group creates its own identity by elevating one or more [aspects of overlapping roles] above the others” (Lindahl 1996a:110), so does each emphasize certain components or functions of disguise. Different Mardi Gras runs develop their own signature looks.

In interviews, people in Tee Mamou and Basile have emphasized that women’s and men’s Mardi Gras disguises are similar and even interchangeable. Although they do draw on many of the same conventions and symbolic devices, there are often subtle distinctions in designs, materials, or details. As historian Karen Leathem has observed of Carnival disguises in New Orleans, even the same costume can convey very different meanings depending on the wearer’s gender (1994). As women adopt and adapt older forms, they reinterpret traditional meanings for Cajun Mardi Gras disguise.

Tee Mamou and Basile, close neighbors on the prairies of southwest Louisiana, illustrate some of the similarities and differences in local Mardi Gras traditions. Basile, an Evangeline Parish town of no more than 2,000 people, is less than seven miles north of the long, narrow wedge of Acadia Parish countryside known as Tee Mamou (Little Mamou). Both communities have long Mardi Gras histories, each having hosted a men’s *courir de Mardi Gras* (Mardi Gras run) since the early 20th century or earlier, and having moved from horses to farm trucks in the years surrounding World War II. For those most closely involved, running Mardi Gras is a deeply meaningful art that people in both places say is “in our blood.”

The women’s runs in Basile and Tee Mamou were founded only a few years apart. By the late 1960s, a band of Evangeline Parish women were running Mardi Gras in the countryside between Basile and nearby Duralde, traveling in the back of a rice truck. This early version of Basile’s women’s run, led by a male captain, took place on the weekend before Mardi Gras. Eventually Basile’s two runs merged for practical reasons, but men and women still ride on different trucks. Both female and male captains, aided by co-captains, maintain discipline.

The Tee Mamou women’s Mardi Gras run dates to the early 1970s. Almost from the beginning, it has been closely linked to the local men’s run. Gerald Frugé acted as head captain for both the men’s and the women’s runs until his death in 1998, and today his son Todd does the same. Both groups belong to the same Mardi Gras association,⁷ and many of the same men “captain” for both. However, the Tee Mamou women’s run has maintained its separate identity, taking place on the Saturday before the men’s

Tuesday run. As Gerald Frugé said in a 1988 interview, “We’ve always ran separate . . . [although] other groups around here run together.”

Both men and women in Tee Mamou seem to favor this arrangement, in part because male Mardi Gras are often treated more roughly by male captains.⁸ If the two events were combined, each might lose some of its own identity and ties to tradition. Suson Launey explains that the women continue to hold their run on Saturday “out of respect for the men. . . . We respect their right to run on Mardi Gras day” as they always have (Launey 2000). In the late 1980s, though, women successfully lobbied to join the male Mardi Gras for their Tuesday parade down Iota’s main street; according to Suson, they “wanted to be included because we *are* part of the Tee Mamou Mardi Gras” (Launey 2000).

Female Mardi Gras in Tee Mamou and Basile have much in common. Each group is typically made up of about thirty to fifty maskers, ranging from teenaged girls to women in their fifties. Almost all are drawn from the immediate area,⁹ a few who have moved away return each year to run Mardi Gras. In both places, most of what Carl Lindahl calls “core participants” (1996a:113) are women in their forties and fifties who have participated regularly for many years. These seasoned *vieilles* (old) Mardi Gras create much of the festival’s energy and instruct younger women in Mardi Gras skills and protocol.

Many aspects of the Mardi Gras performance differ from Basile to Tee Mamou; one of the most visible is costuming. Both communities have higher proportions of hand-made masks and classic suits than most other Cajun Mardi Gras runs (Lindahl and Ware 1997), but each has developed a style shaped by community tradition and the creativity of local artists.

Disguise in Tee Mamou

About fifteen years ago, the Tee Mamou Mardi Gras Association set standards for disguise in its men’s and women’s runs. Most of its printed rules—distributed or read aloud at pre-Mardi Gras meetings—address behavior, but one specifies that “a traditional Mardi Gras costume is required to run Mardi Gras. A traditional costume must have a hand-made mask (no rubber or Halloween-type mask), a traditional suit and a capuchon.”

This rule was a response to the painted faces, storebought masks, and eclectic clothing prevalent in most Cajun runs by the 1970s. Capitaine Gerald Frugé once explained that members at that time were guided by a sense that “tradition to us . . . is a costume, the capuchons, and the hand-made masks” (1989). The association began stressing these articles in an effort to be “more original” or authentic (1992). The group’s standards are points of pride for members, who (as several have commented) feel strongly about “holding true to our tradition.” They often cite costume requirements as one way their run differs from others.

In part because of these guidelines, men and women in Tee Mamou wear essentially the same costumes. One Tee Mamou woman says that men’s and women’s suits are “pretty much the same. In fact, a lot of times . . . some of the men [will] borrow our suits” for their Tuesday run, stated Merline Bergeaux, Patsy Hebert, and Shirley Reed,

personal interview (1988). The two-piece suits are homemade of cotton or synthetic blends, cut on a pajama pattern. Women modify the basic pattern according to the demands of their performance; for instance, many prefer pull-on shirts because buttons are easily lost as the Mardi Gras climb trees and roll on the ground. Most women now add a pouch to their shirts for carrying the live chickens, green onions, and other contraband they try to steal from their hosts.

Classic Mardi Gras suits, Carl Lindahl observes, are “almost a uniform, calculated to make all guisers look alike” (Lindahl and Ware 1997:14). The baggy costumes—in cold weather worn over jeans and sweat shirts—conceal most women’s shapes so effectively that, as senior co-captain Claude Durio notes, “When they’re dressed up, someone that’s not . . . familiar with them, you can’t tell the difference between a man and a woman” (1992). Because their run is separate from the men’s, however, captains and other community members never entirely lose sight of the fact that these are “lady Mardi Gras.”

Tee Mamou’s guidelines may narrow the range of possible disguises, but women nevertheless find ways to make their suits eye-catching. “We try to make them as colorful as possible” with unusual fabrics and trim, a *vielle* Mardi Gras says (Bergeaux et al. 1988). Many suits juxtapose loud prints with blocks of “high-contrast and high-intensity colors” (Abrahams 1987:180). A few women wear the purple, green, and gold combination originally associated with the New Orleans Carnival—and increasingly with Mardi Gras in general—but colors such as red, yellow, green, and hot pink are still more common in Tee Mamou.¹⁰ Makers finish their suits with hand-fringed fabric along arms and legs; more fringe winds around the matching capuchon. Some add other comic touches, like the Mardi Gras partners who stood side by side with arms outstretched, spelling out “Double” and “Trouble” on their batwing sleeves.

Handmade masks provide the most room for individuality. Many female Mardi Gras either make their own or decorate blank screen masks purchased from local maskmakers. Others buy or borrow finished masks from local artists such as Suson Launey or Renée Frugé. Although Mardi Gras often create or buy a new mask each year, some women—like men—continue to wear a favorite mask for years, updating it occasionally. Shirley Reed, one of the run’s core members since its earliest years, says of her mask, “I hate to put it up because I’m so used to that one. I like my mask and it fits. . . . Sometimes I’ll change some of the things on it, but it’s basically the same” (Bergeaux et al. 1988).

Two types of masks are popular among Tee Mamou women: those made of flexible wire screen and needlepoint masks stitched on plastic mesh. Needlepoint masks are the invention of Suson Launey, a dedicated member of the run for two decades. Like many women, she found that stray wires on galvanized steel masks gouged her as she clowned and tangled with captains. Because “a woman’s face scratches easy” (Launey 1996), she began making yarn masks on plastic screen instead. Immediately adopted by other women, needlepoint masks have become a hallmark of the Tee Mamou women’s run; a few local men also wear them. In a given year, half the women might wear needlepoint masks and the other half wire screen masks.

Whether yarn or screen, Tee Mamou masks are always full faced. Most extend above the wearer’s forehead and below her chin—because “the purpose of the mask is to

cover your face,” Launey says (1996)—and hang flat in front of her face. In their larger-than-life masks and tall capuchons, the Mardi Gras’ heads take on a prominence key to the group’s visual identity.

Generous three-dimensional decoration sets Tee Mamou masks apart from the painted masks typical of most other Cajun runs. Almost anything can become part of a mask’s design: tire treads, a potholder, costume jewelry, or old shoulder pads. Features are purposely disproportionate—long, pointed, or hooked noses; puffy satin mouths; and Dumbo-like ears, for instance. Fangs and long tongues often protrude from gaping mouths.

Typically, a beard and moustache obscure the lower half of a Tee Mamou mask, and often the entire creation is covered with scraps of fabric, feathers, or fur. Renée Frugé, captain Gerald Frugé’s youngest daughter, has made masks—first for herself and then for others—since she began running Mardi Gras in 1989 at the age of 13. She says, “I find that a lot of the masks I sell, [the Mardi Gras] like to be hidden behind it. That way, they like to go behind someone they know, and stand right behind them. That way, whenever they turn around, [we] can look them straight in the eyes, you know, and we can have a big smile on our face, and they can’t tell who we are. And they’re sitting out there trying to figure it out” (1995).

The overall effect of the group’s multicolored suits and masks is one of both variety and uniformity. As the Basile Mardi Gras Association’s president remarks of his own community’s run, “That’s what makes a pretty Mardi Gras. The colors” (Rider 1992). Often, suits and masks are so distinctive that captains learn to identify individuals by their disguises during the run.

After a late afternoon gumbo, many women return home to change into a second disguise for their Mardi Gras dance that evening. New suits and masks make the Mardi Gras unfamiliar to captains who “get used to seeing us in one costume during the day-time [and] pick us out,” Launey says (1996).

The dance also offers an opportunity for more extravagant display, as a crowd gathers to watch the maskers dance, two by two, around the dance floor. Many Mardi Gras indulge in more spectacular materials and designs for nighttime suits and masks. Fancy masks may have plumes and sequins, or gimmicks such as battery-powered flashing eyes. As Suson says, “Nighttime is kind of show-off costumes. You know, the better costume you wear at night, [and] the better mask. . . . More work goes into it” (1991). Although night disguises are worn for only a few hours, they still must be rugged enough to withstand intense horseplay as the Mardi Gras jump on and wrestle with the captains, to the amusement of spectators.

Basile Disguises

Basile’s disguise tradition is more inclusive than Tee Mamou’s. Boundaries between Cajun Mardi Gras costumes and other kinds of masquerade—notably Halloween disguises and New Orleans-style Carnival attire—are less sharply defined here. Women and men value what Potic Rider calls a “costume that originates in Mardi Gras” (1991)—a screen mask, capuchon, and fringed suit—but they also appreciate unusual disguises. Debbie Andrus, who began running Mardi Gras in 1969 as a seventh grader,

says, "I like to see the Mardi Gras costume [in] the traditional Carnival colors—the purple, the gold [and green]. Because you can say, "Oh, that's a pretty costume, that's a pretty costume.' But they're all pretty much the same."

Basile's legacy of innovative Mardi Gras costumes has been shaped to a large extent by the local Mardi Gras *bal*. For decades, Mardi Gras here have tried to outdo each other for trophies awarded to the prettiest, ugliest (weirdest), and—in recent years—most original (traditional) costumes at the dance following their run. Other seasonal events during the 1960s and 1970s also featured similar contests; married couples and entire families might mask for Basile's Knights of Columbus dance or for masquerade balls in Lake Charles. Many disguises described as especially memorable were created for the Basile Mardi Gras dance or for other balls. Certain individuals and families are still well known for their love of striking disguises, and they can spend months planning and hundreds of dollars making them.

From its earliest years, members of the Basile women's run have worn a wide range of disguises. Founders "dressed up in all kinds of ways," recalls Debbie Andrus (1998); over the years women have masked as Charlie Chaplin, clowns, Raggedy Ann dolls, and playing cards, as well as in conventional Mardi Gras suits and screen masks.

Today, costumes favored by Basile's female Mardi Gras fall loosely into three categories. A growing proportion of the women—like most of the town's male Mardi Gras—wear the classic Cajun Mardi Gras disguise. Others incorporate some but not all of the traditional components. Finally, women may choose to wear another kind of disguise altogether, one created around a particular character or theme.

A majority of women in Basile's 1999 and 2000 runs wore brightly colored and fringed suits, capuchons, and some type of wire screen mask. Many are young women trained through the Basile children's run (where traditional disguises are encouraged) before graduating to the adult event at 16. Others have made conscious efforts to return to the older style. Putnam, a member of the Mardi Gras association since the early 1980s, wore a variety of costumes and masks for years but began choosing screen masks when her daughters joined the run. She says, "Then we started actually wearing the screen masks, so they would learn that old tradition, you know. And not just the plastic masks" (1998). For a few years, she made screen masks for herself and her family.¹¹ Helena Putnam says of her own efforts, "For a couple years' time, I made masks. I went into maskmaking. I did the painting. In fact . . . one year I used J. B.'s basic mask, and then I did it myself. . . . I did the shaping too. But I just don't have time to do that any more" (1998).

Basile's wire screen masks are strikingly different from those popular in Tee Mamou. Typically they are smaller, made of less pliant screen, and molded to facial contours. They are decorated more conservatively: stylized features are painted or drawn on the screen, and a fringed beard is often sewn around the edges.

Shellshaker screen masks serve as a badge of the Basile run, much as needlepoint masks do for Tee Mamou women. Members of two prominent Mardi Gras families, the Moreaus and Riders, craft masks from the rigid, stainless-steel mesh used in local oilfields, and paint them in their own distinctive styles (Lindahl 1998; Lindahl and Ware 1997). Shellshaker masks are made on a small scale and are not offered for sale; however, they often are handed down or loaned to family members and friends.

Made by men, Basile's shellshaker masks have typically been worn by men as well. Recently, though, a few women have begun wearing them and even putting their own stamp on the tradition. For Basile's run in 2000, Potic Rider made blank masks for two or three teenaged relatives, and the girls then painted their own designs.

Far more common among Basile women are lighter-weight screen masks purchased from local makers. A number of women wear an abbreviated version that ends just below the wearer's nose, often with a long fringe to cover the lower half of the face. These half-masks are lighter and cooler than full-faced masks, and make it easier to drink, eat, and smoke without unmasking.

Basile women modify the traditional disguise in other ways as well. Some choose not to wear a screen mask at all; in Basile, unlike Tee Mamou, a handmade mask is not considered essential. Photographs of the local women's run twenty-five years ago show a high proportion of commercial plastic or rubber masks. Many women found screen masks uncomfortable and had limited access to them. Debbie Andrus remembers that "the women didn't wear them that much" but, instead, "we did up our faces or we went [to] buy rubber masks or whatever" (1998).

The maskmaking tradition is still dominated by men in Basile, but screen masks can now be purchased from several artists (male and female) in the region. Still, many Basile women prefer dominos with long fringes, homemade fabric masks, and rubber or transparent plastic Halloween-style masks. In many cases, they feel that storebought masks or face paint better suit a specific disguise or conceal more effectively. Berline Boone, who has run Mardi Gras for about thirty years, says of screen masks, "I think it's beautiful, but that's not my kind of thing" (1998). Instead, "I usually wear a rubber mask, one that covers my whole face. Because everybody knows me, they'll recognize me," otherwise (1994).

Some women choose not wear capuchons because they are cumbersome as the maskers dismount from the truck, dance, and clown during the day. The pointed hats—often 20 inches tall or more—tangle with tree branches, ceiling fans, or other capuchons. Berline Boone says, "There's a lot of people over here [who] don't like that tied around their neck. It gets caught. It's so pointed, it's so long . . . I very seldom wear that" (1994). Instead, women may wear wigs, sombreros, or other unusual headgear.

Mortarboards, a traditional alternative to capuchons, are closely associated with female Mardi Gras in Basile. Now relatively rare in Cajun runs, mortarboards were popular among Basile's older male Mardi Gras 30 years ago. They were particularly common among "the older ladies in town that made most of the costumes," in the words of Susie Lopez, a longtime Mardi Gras (1991).¹² Snookie LeJeune, another core member, says she always considered the capuchon to be "a man's headdress" (1991) and the mortarboard a woman's. Susie and other women who still wear mortarboards from time to time preserve an older style and a sense of local tradition distinct from the general Cajun ideal.

A third category of disguise is based on a particular theme. These creative disguises, which depart from the conservative Cajun model and more closely resemble other kinds of masquerade, are intended to be as unique as possible. Mardi Gras partners often create matching or complementary disguises, such as a pair of cards.

Both Debbie Andrus and her long-time Mardi Gras partner, Helena Putnam, admire the classic Mardi Gras costume but find it potentially limiting. They appreciate a disguise that “says something beyond being a costume” and reflects “creative originality,” in Helena’s terms (1998). She prefers “something that is not like what anybody else has. . . . [Something] unique, and that took some creativity to put together. Not something that you went to a seamstress and said, ‘Make me a suit.’” Debbie Andrus says that some of the most effective thematic disguises are ones that have “some type of personality or character” built into them. Costuming should inspire the masker to “figure out what you can do” as a clever beggar and trickster as she engages spectators in a guessing game (Andrus, personal interview, 1998).

Because if they don’t know who you are, it’s like you keep egging them on. . . . And you just play that role. . . . And it’s fun to have that [variety]. . . . If you’re all dressed in the same costume, you pretty much all kind of do the same thing. Whereas if you have your own personality, [and are] dressed as someone different, then there’s always that one that can . . . pick at people. [Andrus 1998]

Successful disguise here, as elsewhere, is layered (Leathem 1994; Lindahl 1998); it includes altered posture, speech, and movement as well as masks and costumes. The general Mardi Gras role has its own stylized gestures and high-pitched voice, but a character disguise—an old woman, for example, or a gorilla—suggests new ways of clowning and interacting with others. According to Debbie, “Whatever I wore, it’s like I had something up my sleeve that day. . . . I have a goal, you know, if it’s to act crazy or a certain way to act crazy. Or if it’s an old lady [then] you can be teasing old men or old women” (1998).

A disguise’s personality or uniqueness can lie in a comic prop (a pacifier dangling from the neck, for example), but most often the starting point is an interesting mask. Berline Boone looks for unusual masks at fun shops around Halloween and throughout the year, and saves them for Mardi Gras. The rest of the costume can be pieced together from old clothes discovered at garage sales, recycled from old costumes, or custom made.

Character disguises in Basile are rarely the overt parodies of politicians or other public figures seen in urban celebrations. Instead, they seem to draw on more general types and fictional characters. These disguises frequently resemble Halloween standards—men have dressed as brides, vampires, and the Grim Reaper, and women as pirates and gypsies. However, Helena Putnam, Debbie Andrus, and others in the Basile run feel that entirely prefabricated costumes—fine for children’s trick-or-treating—are not appropriate for Mardi Gras. Part of the disguise should be hand assembled, if not handmade.

Thematic disguises are especially useful in a closely knit community like Basile, where maskers are often recognized by the way they walk, dance, or “pick at” people. Debbie Andrus says that when she was younger, “We tried hard every year to dress different. . . . And in a small town, you had to dress different, it seemed like, so nobody would recognize you” (1998).

Basile’s range of costumes sets it apart from Tee Mamou and distinguishes female from male maskers. Men at times wear most of the kinds of disguises described here;

differences lie primarily in numbers and details. The great majority of Basile men today wear full-faced screen masks, Mardi Gras suits, and capuchons, although a few still choose personality costumes. Women seem more inclined than men both to modify the traditional uniform and to create thematic disguises. Choices also seem to run along generational lines. Most young women wear classic costumes or variants; those who prefer character disguises are mainly *vieilles Mardi Gras*.

Some Mardi Gras wear the same disguise for house visits and the *bal de Mardi Gras* that night. Most Basile maskers, though, like those in Tee Mamou, have a dressier costume and mask for the dance. They attach special importance to the bal and their entrance or “grand march,” when captains lead the Mardi Gras, dancing and stomping to the *chanson de Mardi Gras*, around the hall. Debbie Andrus says, “To me, the whole purpose of running that day . . . [is] to make that march.” In the past—and still nowadays—“The thing was to make a show in the night time. And I think that was one thing about the Basile Mardi Gras. People would come see our costumes, and it would make a beautiful show,” Andrus believes (1998). Years ago, members say, disguises sometimes rivaled urban Carnival costumes in ornateness.

Women and men today are more likely to wear screen masks and traditional suits for the dance because “it’s more original,” as the late Ella Ruth Young (women’s captain for many years) explained in a 1991 interview. Still, some nighttime suits and hats are made of fabrics that shimmer as the maskers dance, and a shiny suit is usually judged “prettiest” in the contest that follows the march. In Debbie Andrus’ words, “A march is kind of like a parade, you know, you just want that pretty [effect] with the lights and all that shine” (1998). Others choose thematic disguises or wear exotic but impractical masks to compete for the (equally coveted) “ugliest costume” award. Male Mardi Gras, for instance, have created one-of-a-kind masks from materials such as rabbit fur and cow pelvises (Lindahl and Ware 1997).

These descriptions of community disguise traditions in Tee Mamou and Basile are, of course, based on broad generalizations. Conventions are constantly changing, and distinctions become blurred as celebrants in one place buy or borrow masks and suits made in another. Suson Launey’s and Jackie Miller’s masks appear on male Mardi Gras in Basile, Renée Frugé’s masks are worn by participants in the Eunice run, and Basile suits show up in Elton. Maskmakers also trade ideas with artists in other communities. Recently, Suson Launey made and wore her first shellshaker screen mask after seeing one made by the Moreau family.

The boundaries of community tradition have always been elastic. Two generations ago, many Mardi Gras bought identical screen masks from local merchants, although they might add their own touches. Each run’s visual identity is based primarily in the ways that participants adapt and combine often similar elements in their Mardi Gras performance.

Disguise as Symbolic Expression

Despite stylistic differences, women’s Mardi Gras disguises function in similar ways in Basile and Tee Mamou. The “self-constructed façades” (Leathem 1994:31) of masks and suits allow women to invent new identities for that day and simultaneously play

with fundamental cultural categories. As they “perform their group identity for themselves and for outsiders” (Gaudet 1998:34) through costuming and role-playing, lady Mardi Gras present many different images of themselves, both testing and reinforcing social hierarchies.

Many of the symbolic means women employ are common not only to male Mardi Gras but to festive maskers in general. Lady Mardi Gras, like men, often dress as exotic “Others,” inverting gender, age, social class, or—more rarely—race. At other times, their disguises reinforce, rather than reverse, cultural hierarchies.

Playing with Gender Roles

Cross dressing is a staple of many all-male Mardi Gras runs. Men in wigs, dresses, and heavy lipstick assume the comic role of *la vieille femme* (the old woman). The part—which can be either a white or black woman—is played as a broad burlesque. Despite her name, *la vieille femme* is not usually portrayed as elderly or infirm; instead, her fertility and (often overbearing) sexuality are emphasized. Male maskers create huge breasts and hips with pillows and balloons, and wantonly chase, dance with, and kiss onlookers. Sometimes the *vieille femme* is pregnant and pretends to give birth at intervals during the run.

As Barry Ancelet (1992) and Carl Lindahl (1996a) have observed, male Mardi Gras purposely make these female personas unconvincing, leaving hairy chests, legs, and faces clearly visible, for example. Lindahl writes that “the ideal is . . . to appear conspicuously male . . . at the same time that he reshapes himself to caricature female form, most notably enormous breasts borne so clumsily that no one can be fooled about the sexual identity of the player” (1996a:112). Michael Taft describes similar role-playing in Canadian mock weddings; as he notes, cross-dressing men make clear the fact that they are “not playing the roles of women, but playing *with* the roles of women” (1997:135).

Female Mardi Gras in Tee Mamou and Basile have no well-defined, stock male figure comparable to the *vieille femme*. However, their costumes often use various degrees of inversion to explore sexual boundaries. The most obvious means is taking on an unmistakably masculine form. In the early days of the Basile run, women painted beards on their faces, dressed as pirates, or masked in pairs as elderly husbands and wives. One female Mardi Gras is remembered for flashing an enormous phallus when she masked as a man. Married couples frequently cross dressed to swap roles for masquerade dances. Many of these reversals were just as transparent as men’s female parodies—obviously fake beards, for example. But sometimes women’s impersonations of old men kept relatives and friends guessing.

Cross dressing, though less common among Basile’s lady Mardi Gras these days, is a continuing part of their tradition. Male disguises can be as simple as wearing denim overalls and a straw hat, or a bushy mustache and leather aviator’s helmet. Berline Boone, a master of bizarre costumes, sometimes wears male clothing topped with a gory Halloween mask.

Other disguises stop short of full-scale role reversal, but use male markers to blur gender lines. Women in Tee Mamou, who all wear versions of the classic Mardi Gras disguise, have never cross-dressed. They say that their suits and masks are not specifically

male or female, and the effect is generally one of androgyny rather than inversion (Ware 1995). However, they—like Basile women—often wear bearded or mustached masks. On several occasions, Tee Mamou's female Mardi Gras have worn men's briefs over their *suits de Mardi Gras*, or dangled boxer shorts from a capuchon. At the 1991 women's dance, one of Tee Mamou's most consistently inventive Mardi Gras wore a jock strap over her suit and encouraged spectators to stuff it with dollar bills as if she were a male stripper (Ware 1995).

Basile's female Mardi Gras, with fewer constraints on disguise, can engage in more open (and bawdy) play with gender boundaries. Character costumes offer a range of possibilities and interpretations, from straightforward inversion to more ambiguous juxtapositions. For the 1993 run, two of Basile's seasoned Mardi Gras partners devised what they called "Cajun chef" costumes. These (presumably male) disguises consisted of paper surgical caps, white shirts and trousers, and cooking implements. Each wore a "Cajun apron" that she lifted periodically to reveal an oversized fabric penis and testes. One apron also had pockets marked "His" and "Hers" that hid much smaller male and female genitalia (Ware 1995). Behind their screen masks, the Mardi Gras' features were shadowy but unmistakably female. This imperfect concealment—like the transparency of men's *vieille femme* disguises—was central to the joke, emphasizing what Deloria terms the "doubled identity produced by costumed mimicry" (1998:115–116).

Five years later, a Basile woman created another "betwixt and between" disguise, a hag with both male and female characteristics. Her rubber mask, an ugly woman with a bulbous nose and gapped teeth, was almost hidden under a long and wild black wig. A white towel, tied over her shapeless dress and apron, concealed an oversized penis made of pantyhose stuffed with cotton. Long red fingernails completed the outfit.

Women in both places also use costuming to accentuate their femininity. At times, lady Mardi Gras in Basile mask as specifically female characters—voodoo queens, old ladies, and Raggedy Ann dolls, among others. For the bal several years ago, two Mardi Gras partners wore the long skirts and *gardes de soleil* (sunbonnets) identified with old-fashioned Cajun women.

Many women find small ways to feminize even standard disguises. A few young women in Basile and Tee Mamou have added trailing scarves or ribbon streamers to their capuchons in recent years, or allowed their hair to show underneath hats designed to hide it.

Inverting Age

When Basile women mask as female characters, they rarely choose glamorous figures such as princesses or movie stars. Often they play at being decades older or younger than they really are, dressing as pigtailed little girls, as baby dolls, and particularly as wizened old women. Because of the age gap, these personas offer both anonymity and countless comic possibilities.

Elderly women are especially popular disguises, and women in Basile often perform their own interpretations of the *vieille femme* role. For two years in a row (1996 and 1997), Debbie Andrus created a particularly memorable crone. A toothless mask provided the foundation of her costume; balloons, padding, and rolled-down support hose

transformed her into a stooped, matronly figure. As she hobbled on and off the truck throughout the day, she swatted irritably at spectators with her cane.

Debbie says of her disguise that year, “There were so many people that did not recognize me. . . . My walk was different, and the whole way. And I was dancing different. You know when you’ve got a big butt and big boobs and all this other stuff, [you move differently]. And it covered my whole face, my hands, everything was covered” (1998).

The next year she reluctantly agreed to recreate the old woman character but made a few changes, including a different old woman’s mask. Evoking images of young beauty queens, she added a pageant-style sash announcing the title “Madame Basile” on one side, and “la vieille femme” on the other. Recently Debbie explained, “That’s whenever I decided to come back as the queen old lady. . . . Madame Basile. And my theme was, I got [named] queen of the nursing home. You know how for the Swine Festival, they always [choose a queen from among nursing home residents]” (1998).¹³ On Mardi Gras day, the nursing home is an important stop on Basile’s route. For many participants, this visit is the most meaningful and emotional of the day, because a number of elderly former Mardi Gras now live there (Lindahl 1998). The second time around, her costume no longer hid her identity—by this time everyone knew it was Debbie—but was no less entertaining.

Berline Boone also built her costume for the 1998 Basile run around an exotic old woman’s mask. Berline says that the face, a stark grayish white with hooded eyes and a down-turned red mouth, “doesn’t look like an old lady, it looks like a monster, really. But that’s an old lady’s mask” (personal interview, 1998). Wearing a loudly figured blouse with a clashing head scarf, pearls, and shopping bag, Berline created a very different variation on the *vieille femme*.

Inverting Race

Racial inversion seems to play a much smaller part in Cajun women’s Mardi Gras runs than in men’s. The *nègre* and *négresse*, played by Cajun men wearing black face paint or masks, are long-established comic figures in several all-male community runs; they are both lead clowns and comic foils (Ancelet 1992; Lindahl 1996a). These characters become strongly associated with certain men—typically two of the run’s most gifted performers—who play them year after year.

The origins of the roles are open to speculation, but they have existed in south Louisiana since the 1950s or earlier.¹⁴ Recent literature on blackface minstrelsy traditions offers a number of interesting parallels to Cajun’s portrayals of blacks. Because this kind of reversal is not a significant part of women’s Mardi Gras runs, I do not discuss it in depth here. (For more on minstrel shows and blackface masquerade, see Abrahams 1993, Lott 1993, Toll 1974.) The Tee Mamou men’s run has featured a *nègre* and *négresse* (intermittently at least) for more than forty years. Basile’s run has also included one or both figures at various times—in recent years, the *nègre* alone.

These blackface roles, increasingly controversial today, are parodic commentaries on racial relationships in the region (Ancelet 1992; Lindahl 1996a) but also on traditional gender roles. Usually the *nègre* and *négresse*—as disparate in size as possible—mask as a

couple. The *négresse*, a blackface version of the licentious *vieille femme* character, is typically played by a large man. Dressed in loud colors and smeared lipstick, she is “usually a mammy figure with pendulous breasts and swollen buttocks who kisses all the males she can, leaving splotches of greaspaint on their faces” (1996a:112), as Carl Lindahl describes her. Her mate is traditionally a shorter, slighter man. Although he is himself “often a stereotypical woman chaser preying on white women” (Lindahl 1996a:112), he is frequently bullied and cuckolded by his spouse, in classic “woman on top” role reversal (Davis 1978).

Cajun women in Tee Mamou and Basile have never adopted black characters as a regular feature of their runs, and I know of only one instance of a woman wearing blackface. As a practical joke, Helena Putnam briefly assumed the role of *nègre* (played by Tony Johnson for a number of years) for Basile’s 1993 Mardi Gras dance. In black greaspaint and curly wig, wearing Johnson’s signature suit jacket and swinging his cane, she joined the men to lead the group’s grand march into the hall. As intended, only half of this double inversion was convincing. No one could mistake her race, but her mimicry of Tony was so skillful that most people did not catch the substitution.

Rayna Green calls playing Indian “one of the oldest and most pervasive forms of American cultural expression” (1988:30). Basile’s female Mardi Gras—like male Mardi Gras here and elsewhere (Ancelet 1992)—have occasionally painted their faces and dressed as Indians. Many of these disguises are relatively simple, but some are meticulously detailed. Wayne Moreau spent months making hand-beaded Indian costumes for himself, his wife, and his brother-in-law for a 1972 Mardi Gras dance in Lake Charles. He recycled parts of these disguises when he helped Debbie Andrus create one of her favorite disguises, a Native American woman, for the Basile run. She says, “Nobody recognized me that year. But I had the [braided] wig, I had the actual costume that was like an Indian—the skirt, and a top with the fringes, the moccasins. And we had . . . the big bells all around your wrist and then around the ankles. And at that time I had painted my face brown [with] a special type of makeup they had, and I fixed my face up like an Indian” (personal interview, 1991).

Cajun interpretations of Indian dress draw on popular stereotypes rather than influences by local tribes (Ancelet 1992; Lindahl 1996a).¹⁵ The proximity of the Coshatta community to the routes of several Cajun Mardi Gras runs leads to some interesting interactions. Barry Ancelet (1992) has observed that Elton’s all-male Mardi Gras group, which rides on horseback through the reservation, sometimes includes Cajun men imitating Indian dress. And in 1999, a member of the Coshatta tribe (wearing a standard Mardi Gras suit) ran Mardi Gras with the Elton riders for the first time. These stylized versions of Plains styles of a century ago convey an image of Indians as “distant, primal Others” (Deloria 1998:119) who represent nobility and savagery simultaneously, imbued with what Deloria terms the “authenticity of the primitive” (1998:115).¹⁶

Carl Lindahl (1996a) notes that many Cajun Mardi Gras feel a strong identification with Indians on several levels. In Basile and some other prairie communities (though apparently not in Tee Mamou), Mardi Gras were traditionally called *les sauvages*, the local word for Indians (Lindahl 1996a; Mire 1993). In the past, he suggests, masked Mardi Gras “played the roles of tribes beyond the borders of civilization, bent on unraveling the fabric of society” (Lindahl 1996a:111). To perform the Mardi Gras role

itself, then, is to play Indian. Some Basile participants compare the Mardi Gras' high-pitched whoops to Indian war cries and feel that their fringed suits symbolize Native dress. In Potic Rider's opinion, "A Mardi Gras suit is like an Indian dress. You know, you got to have the fringe . . . down the sleeves, and across the back, the pockets, the pants legs" (1992).

These connections are rarely voiced in many Cajun communities today—I have never heard them in Tee Mamou—but in Basile they remain strong. Several years ago, a pair of Basile women wore shirts that spelled out *chawage* (a phonetic spelling of *sauvage*) in hand-made letters on the back, a reference to their role as rowdy Mardi Gras.

Nature and Culture

Another form of inversion lies in crossing the line between civilization and untamed nature through disguise. Women, like men in these communities, sometimes align themselves with nature by masking as animals (real or imaginary) or part-human creatures. Berline Boone has dressed in a gorilla suit for the Basile run, and Debbie Andrus and her partner once played dragons. Several years ago, Berline's nieces wore pink long johns, curly tails, teats made from baby-bottle nipples, and plastic snouts as the Three Little Pigs.

Most commonly, Mardi Gras simply integrate animalistic features in their disguises, especially their masks. Tee Mamou women like masks covered in fur, hair, or feathers, and they heighten the feral look by adding beaks, snouts, and fangs. Renée Frugé, whose masks are especially hairy, comments jokingly that "I always made them kind of resemble an animal, and I didn't know why, but I just did. . . . I always just liked a wild look. . . . Anything to scare the children" (personal interview, 1995). Store-bought masks in Basile are often even more clearly beast-like, with open mouths displaying fangs and rows of sharp teeth.

Tee Mamou's female maskmakers also use a variety of miniature animals in their designs. Creatures with symbolic meaning for Cajuns, such as crawfish, alligators, and, especially, chickens (which stand for the rural Mardi Gras run) are popular, as are a variety of insects, reptiles, and rodents. Roaches, snakes, and ants crawl across masks or sit on long tongues, on the verge of being swallowed.

Disguises in both communities often suggest the part-human wild man or savage figure commonly associated with "nature without controls" (Abrahams 1995:128; see also Mire 1993). A shaggy yarn mask in Tee Mamou features a nose pierced by a chicken bone, for example. Other suits and masks are entirely covered with grasses, moss, or similar materials. A "Swamp Thing" costume draped with layers of Spanish moss is a common theme for men and women in Basile.

Berline Boone is adept at wild man or monster disguises, and her moss suits are among her best-remembered "ugly" costumes. For the 1999 run, she achieved a similarly shaggy effect with a shapeless costume covered with long, ropy strands of gray-green wool, topped with a grimacing mask. The following year, a niece recycled this suit with a different mask.

Indian costumes (and for male Mardi Gras, perhaps blackface figures) are more subtle variants on the wild man image. Like other indigenous figures, they are imagined as untamed savages and "primitives . . . in close contact with nature" (Deloria 1998:117).

Despite Renée Frugé's joke that she makes "anything to scare the children," maskers in both communities—especially women—are careful not to seriously frighten young children. To adult eyes at least, the effect of most handmade masks (especially in Tee Mamou) is more comic than scary. Maskmakers juxtapose incongruous details such as prim eyeglasses and a hairy pig's snout, and—as Abrahams writes of festive play in general—such "dramatic opposition of polar opposites are so immediately contradictory that we can respond only by laughing" (1987:179). Some of the rubber Halloween masks in Basile are genuinely gruesome, however.

So Ugly It's Pretty: Playing with Feminine Ideals

Another form of reversal or boundary crossing—one that overlaps those above—involves cultural ideals of femininity. The "impromptu wildness" associated with running Mardi Gras is often at odds with traditional expectations of women's behaviour and appearance (Ware 1994, 1995). Disguise not only allows women to step into this unladylike roleplaying but provides another vehicle for challenging ideals of decorum and beauty.

Some costumes "break the normal prohibitions against scatological and sexual display," as Michael Taft writes of Halloween maskers on the Canadian prairie (1994:159). Provocative costumes such as Basile's overendowed chefs and ambisexual hags comprise a very small minority of women's costumes, but they are particularly striking. Very much in the spirit of the carnivalesque grotesque with its emphasis on the "material bodily lower stratum" (Bakhtin 1968:62),¹⁷ they nudge the bounds of local social convention. Many spectators and other Mardi Gras reacted to these costumes with appreciative laughter, but some were embarrassed at the same time. One remarked that disguises like this would not have been acceptable a few years ago. They were funny, but also a little shocking—all the more so because such public display by women is unexpected.¹⁸

The women who chose these costumes were "old" Mardi Gras who knew their audiences and could anticipate who would be offended. Fabric genitals were kept hidden under flaps when children were present, for example, and only pulled out for those who might appreciate the joke. Disguises that test the celebration's limits for tolerance are measures of cultural competence, in a sense; only women and men who understand these bounds can successfully carry off transgressive costumes.

Female Mardi Gras have access to a range of aesthetics in their disguises. Drawing upon Basile's categories for awards, disguises can be pretty, ugly, or original. Basile women can choose satin suits in beautiful colors with hand sewn appliques to compete for prettiest costume. But having the ugliest costume is also something to aspire to, and masks, in particular, are often made as ugly as possible.

Female Mardi Gras wear far more ugly disguises than sexually suggestive ones. In this context, ugly can mean weird, unique, or one-of-a-kind rather than unattractive. But many masks in Tee Mamou and Basile are meant to be repugnant. Renée Frugé says that in decorating her masks, she looks for touches that make her think, "Oh, that's ugly, gross, or scary" (1995). In both communities, masks sometimes feature silicone

snot hanging from warty noses, crooked teeth jutting from contorted mouths, and eyes popping or crossing.

Many women mask in pretty and ugly costumes at various times. Ultimately, both have the same practical purpose—to attract as much attention and *charité* (donations), as possible. But often ugly just seems to be more fun, offering better opportunities for “cutting up.” Debbie Andrus, who has won awards for prettiest and ugliest costumes, says that she likes “just . . . anything that you can act crazy in”; often this means an outlandish costume. Suson Launey suggests that part of an ugly mask’s attraction is “the novelty, that no one has one like you. And besides, it’s crazy.” And Berline Boone, especially drawn to what one Mardi Gras calls “horrific” masks, says, “I always love the ugly masks. . . . They have some beautiful costumes at night. But I’m not into that” (1998).

The idea of making oneself as ugly or strange as possible is, of course, common in festive traditions; ugliness represents another type of exotic Otherness. The grotesque ideal becomes especially interesting when women mask, because it stands in such sharp contrast to everyday life, where female beauty remains important. Debbie Andrus’ depiction of the wizened old lady wearing a pageant queen’s sash hints at, and derives comedy from, this disparity. On Mardi Gras, then, ordinary esthetics are upended and blurred, as masks become “so ugly that they’re beautiful, or so beautiful that it’s ugly,” in Junior LeBlue’s words (Lindahl and Ware 1997:40). In a subtle form of gender inversion, ugly becomes just as desirable as pretty for women.

The distance provided by a disguise—a second, easily discarded identity—lets female Mardi Gras play freely with cultural ideas about appearance. Not surprisingly, most women’s willingness to be ugly extends only as deep as the disguise itself. Beneath their false faces and baggy suits, most women still have everyday concerns about how they look; they worry about capuchon-flattened hair, ripped seams, and dents left on their faces by masks. Because they remove their masks periodically to eat and drink, some women wear makeup underneath.

Meanings

The comic reversals of Mardi Gras are parodies, but the ways that different maskers perform these inversions are significant. The traits they choose to lampoon reveal much about how they see themselves and the Other whose face they temporarily assume.

Gender inverse disguises “distill characteristics of the opposite sex for humorous effect” (Leathem 1994:58). Exaggerating these aspects provokes laughter as it distances the masker from his or her role. Men masking as women highlight obvious features—breasts and hips, rouged mouths, pregnant bellies, and even (in more extreme costumes) erect nipples and pubic hair. As they clown, they act out a promiscuous and—in the case of *la négresse* in particular—often unwelcome sexuality, as Carl Lindahl has observed (personal communication, 3 March 1999). In Taft’s words, such roleplaying “not only asserts the power of masculinity but . . . attempts to lessen the power of femininity” (1997:136).

When female Mardi Gras cross-dress, they too focus on predictable male features—facial hair and clothing in innocuous costumes, and penises and testes in more daring

ones. However, their roleplaying seems less aggressively sexual. Unlike male *vieilles femmes*, cross-dressing women do not chase and kiss spectators, for example. Nor do they generally act out machismo in the exaggerated way that men perform femininity. Helena Putnam remembers that when she masked as an old man years ago, she played a fairly restrained role rather than an “aggressive type of character” (2000). She suggests that this was in part because of her character’s age but primarily because she was reluctant to offend other female Mardi Gras and onlookers. Even women’s most extreme (and rare) form of play, flashing fake genitalia, maintains a certain distance and is aimed only at specific viewers.

Women’s portrayals of the *vieille femme* and other female figures are very different from men’s; they tend to de-emphasize sexuality, reproduction, and ideals of feminine beauty. Women do not mimic pregnancy, for instance (although a few have run Mardi Gras in the early stages of pregnancy). Even when they use identical means—like Debbie Andrus padding the *vieille femme*’s bosom with balloons—the effect is not voluptuous but matronly. Their old ladies look and act elderly, and are affectionately referred to as *mamère* (grandmother) and *tante* (aunt).

Crocker writes that by “donning masks one becomes what one could never be” (1982:80). When women mask as men or as androgynous Mardi Gras, they are masking “up” as less marginal and more powerful figures. When female Mardi Gras mask as little girls or old women, though, they are in effect playing at what they have been or could be. Their portrayals, purposely exaggerated, are almost a replay of past identities and a comic rehearsal of future ones.

Women in Basile and Tee Mamou rarely offer interpretations of their disguises, especially those that—like the old hag costume—are most enigmatic. Asked what she thinks her partner’s hag costume was meant to be, Berline Boone says, “You think I know?” Many disguises raise questions that remain unanswered (and, until recently, I often have not thought to ask). Meaning is left open to various understandings, and perhaps that is the point. What is certain is that they are intended to make people laugh, and they do. Like any good disguise, they allow the masker to play the role of festive clown and beggar. But their paradoxical combinations also suggest that the demarcations between many cultural categories are not as fixed as they seem.

Innovation and Change

A final boundary is that of tradition.¹⁹ The Cajun Mardi Gras performance, like all folklore forms, must balance “the dynamism of change” with “the essentially conservative force of tradition itself” (Toelken 1996:39). In many ways, Cajun Mardi Gras runs are self-consciously conservative. Community conventions for disguise, shaped by “arguably the most effective aspect of the past, the *remembered past*” (Lindahl 1996a:102)—or in Toelken’s terms, the “familiar past” (1996:39)—play an important part in the festival’s localized identity. Cajun Mardi Gras associations often feel that they must guard their runs against incursion from mainstream American holidays such as Halloween, and from the New Orleans-style Carnival. People in Tee Mamou and Basile have told me that they try to “hold true to our tradition” by masking and running Mardi Gras much as they remember their parents or grandparents doing. Ideas about exactly what

constitutes tradition are negotiated within each community, although all members may not agree; hence Tee Mamou's rules.

The dynamic nature of the Cajun celebration is particularly evident in its mask-making traditions. In Tee Mamou, variation in Mardi Gras suits and hats is limited but inventive masks flourish. Here, the mask-making tradition is much more elastic than in nearby Eunice or Basile; masks need only be handmade. In Toelken's words, "the artist's own unique talents of inventiveness *within* the tradition are highly valued and are expected to operate strongly" in Tee Mamou (1996:37). Within any material folk art, there is always what Bronner calls the "interdependence of creativity and tradition" (1992:3). Individuals working within traditional forms continually challenge and reshape them (Bronner 1992; Jones 1989; Toelken 1996). Female maskmakers like Suson Launey and Renée Frugé of Tee Mamou have taken a male art and made it their own. Their masks fall within their own community's ideas of tradition and remain "culturally logical" (Toelken 1996:39)—otherwise they would not be worn—but both women expand the limits of tradition as they experiment with new ideas. Suson's and Renée's inventions are shaped not only by their own talents and tastes, but by the preferences of customers—other Mardi Gras and, as their market grows, buyers outside their own communities. Their innovations are in turn adopted by other Mardi Gras and become part of the local aesthetic.

Handmade masks are not usually considered specifically male or female, and women frequently make and wear masks with beards or moustaches. But intentionally or not, women's creations often seem to stand out in their materials, color schemes, or design. Suson's needlepoint masks are one example, converting a traditionally female skill to the male art of maskmaking. (Now, at least one man makes his own versions of this style.) And even accompanied by beards, the bowed satin lips on many of Suson's masks suggest femininity.

Suson Launey and Renée Frugé share a playful approach to decorating their masks, finding inspiration in many different sources. Renée designs masks around whatever items she finds lying around the house or in her mother's sewing basket, as well as her discoveries from local discount stores. Although most of her masks are purposely wild looking, a few seem particularly feminine. A child's mask covered entirely in artificial flowers is clearly meant for a girl, for example; as Renée comments, a boy would be unlikely to wear it.

In any given year, a majority of Tee Mamou's lady Mardi Gras are likely to wear masks made by either Suson or Renée. Thus, both women have tremendous impact on the directions Tee Mamou disguises are taking. As their masks show up in other communities and larger markets, their influence is becoming even more widespread.

Maskmakers are not the only ones setting trends and standards for Mardi Gras costuming. In Basile (where virtually all active maskmakers are men) women like Debbie Andrus, Helena Putnam, Berline Boone, and others also help mold their community's look. They make innovative, effective disguises by creatively mixing storebought, recycled, and handmade items.

Conclusion

As Samuel Kinser writes of New Orleans Carnival, women "convert[ed] a barrier into a crossing point" (1990:120) when they insisted on running Mardi Gras, a "holiday

traditionally commanded by men” (1990:136). Women are taking increasingly active and visible roles in the Cajun celebration, as maskers and as creators of masks and costumes. In their roleplaying and their costuming, female Mardi Gras are both innovators and preservers of old styles and aesthetics.

In a reversal of what happened in the past, it is now women who are redefining community traditions of disguise. They dominate the commercial end of maskmaking, which has become a profitable cottage industry. Their work is displayed and sold at museums, shops, and tourism centers throughout the state. Prolific women make dozens or hundreds of masks each year—Suson Launey estimates that she makes more than two thousand. As recognized folk artists, they teach maskmaking workshops, demonstrate at folklife festivals, and become artists-in-residence in public schools. For many people, then, a handful of talented women have become the public face of the rural Cajun Mardi Gras tradition.

Notes

I am deeply indebted to Carl Lindahl for his many insights into Mardi Gras in general, and his profound understanding of the Basile run in particular. As always, his comments helped me make sense of my own arguments. I am also very grateful to Shana Walton for reading several drafts of this paper and giving me both detailed feedback and encouragement. Jack Santino referred me to several sources on blackface minstrelsy and playing Indian, and these proved very useful in thinking about symbolic inversion. Above all, I thank Kim Moreau, Helena Putnam, Debbie Andrus, Suson Launey, Renée Frugé, and Berline Boone for their patience in explaining things to me repeatedly, and for reading and correcting what I wrote about their community runs.

¹One long-standing exception to female exclusion has been family Mardi Gras runs, where men, women, and children mask together. Barry Ancelet reports that women took part in family Mardi Gras runs in the Scott area and elsewhere in Lafayette Parish both before and after World War II (personal communication, 2 November 1999). Acadia Parish also had at least one family run in the Iota-Egan area during the 1960s (Ware 1994, 1995).

²All of these artists have been profiled in more depth in other articles and books. Suson Launey, Renée Frugé, and Jackie Miller are featured artists in *Cajun Mardi Gras Masks* by Carl Lindahl and Carolyn Ware (1997). Jackie Miller's masks are also pictured in the Langley et al. 1996 monograph on Louisiana craftspeople. Georgie Manuel's work, the subject of an article by Roshto (1992), is also included in two publications edited by Langley et al. (1996, 1997).

³Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Mardi Gras and captains are from interviews by the author during a period from 1988 to 2000.

⁴This project, funded by the Louisiana Division of the Arts, built on similar fieldwork by folklorist Ray Brassieur a year earlier. Ray had conducted interviews (mainly in Cajun French) with older male Cajun Mardi Gras and captains in Tee Mamou, Basile, and other communities. Many of these interviews focused on historical accounts of Acadia Parish runs before or immediately after World War II. In 1988, I interviewed many of the same men in English.

⁵In this context, “original” means oldest or most authentic.

⁶Cajun Mardi Gras very rarely wear an entire mass-produced disguise, but many do wear ready-made masks or incorporate “gag” features (rubber noses and plastic teeth, for example) in handmade masks. The ready availability of these commercial elements has undoubtedly shaped Mardi Gras costuming over the last fifty years. Popular Halloween masks (vampires, monsters, and other gruesome figures, as well as old men and women) have suggested a range of new characters for Cajun maskers.

⁷Members of rural Mardi Gras runs belong not to krewes (a term associated with urban Carnival) but to Mardi Gras associations. These informal, nonprofit organizations exist for the sole purpose of planning and producing the community run (or runs) and managing its finances. To run Mardi Gras, one must join the

association and pay dues that help defray the cost of the event. Some associations such as Basile have elected officers; others, like Tee Mamou, are less structured. Most hold planning meetings in the weeks or months preceding Mardi Gras. The group's leaders handle the many details involved in organizing the run and dance—preparing trucks or wagons, buying beer and gumbo ingredients, hiring musicians, and securing a hall for the dance, for example. All of the money collected by the Mardi Gras throughout the day is returned to the association and either used to pay for that year's run or banked for the next year.

⁸Obscuring the differences between male and female Mardi Gras (as a mixed run might do) is seen as a potential problem in Tee Mamou. Participants say that one reason men and women do not run together here is that captains and spectators would be unable to tell them apart or treat them accordingly. In one woman's words, organizers "didn't want to mix us with the men" mostly "because they're rougher with the men than they are with the women" (Bergeaux et al. 1988).

⁹Rural Tee Mamou encompasses a much larger area than Basile; it includes towns such as Evangeline and rural neighborhoods such as Lejeune Cove and Miller's Cove. The run's participants include a number of women from Iota, a town just outside Tee Mamou's boundaries. Thus, Mardi Gras and captains here are less likely to know all of the other participants, especially first-time runners.

¹⁰In a 1991 interview, Gerald Frugé commented that red, green, and yellow were considered the traditional Mardi Gras colors in Tee Mamou when he was growing up, and the wagon that carries the Mardi Gras is painted in these colors.

¹¹Maskmaking in Basile takes place primarily within three families: the Moreaus, the Riders, and the LeBlues. (See Lindahl 1998 and Lindahl and Ware 1997 for more complete descriptions of Basile's maskmaking traditions.) Vories Moreau and his son Kim make masks of shellshaker screen, as do Potic Rider and his son Chad. J. B. LeBlue, the most prolific of these artists and the only one who markets his work, uses a more malleable wire screen. His teenaged daughter Laura, who runs Mardi Gras in Basile each year, helps him design new masks.

¹²Barry Ancelet (1989) observes that three kinds of hats were traditionally seen in Cajun Mardi Gras runs: capuchons, miters, and mortarboards. He suggests that these styles derive from medieval dress and parody noble women, the clergy, and scholars respectively. He also notes that conical hats have been "long associated with dunces and fools" (1989:3). Mitters and mortarboards are much less common than capuchons in most Cajun runs today.

¹³The Louisiana Swine Festival has taken place in Basile on the first weekend of November for 33 years. The pageant to select a young woman as Miss Louisiana Swine Festival is a highly competitive event, and the title is prestigious. A senior king and queen of the festival are named from among the residents of the local nursing home.

¹⁴Precedents for blackening the face as a form of Mardi Gras disguise date to medieval France (Kinser 1990; see also Ancelet 1992; Lindahl 1996a), but the local history of blackface disguise is not well documented. People in Basile and Tee Mamou today vividly recall the antics of men who masked as nègres and négresses (wearing face paint or screen masks) in the 1950s, and the roles seem to have been well established by then. Whatever their roots, blackface parodies by Southern whites can be, as Ancelet writes, "intense and even problematic when viewed from the outside," since they take place in "a southern state with a history of slavery, segregation, and strained race relations" (1992:1). Cajuns' portrayals are "colored by the racial stereotypes of the South" (Lindahl 1996a:112) as well as those of mainstream America.

Blacks on southwest Louisiana's prairies sometimes mask as whites on Mardi Gras, as Spitzer (1996), Ancelet (1992), and others have noted. Members of Basile's Creole run—which has not taken place in several years—have at times worn whiteface (Kim Moreau, personal communication, 21 February 1999).

Years after blackface figures were banned in more urban celebrations (Philadelphia's mummer's parade, for instance), they survived in French Louisiana's tight-knit communities and seemed to attract little notice or resentment. In recent years, though, the roles have stirred up controversy over the Tee Mamou men's run. Although many Cajuns sincerely feel that the nègre and négresse characters reflect no racist intent, the growing number of out-of-state visitors attending the celebration often find the roleplaying offensive, as do some local African Americans (though others do not). The Tee Mamou Mardi Gras Association is debating whether to retain this aspect of their tradition, and feelings run high on both sides. For now, the nègre and négresse take part in house visits in the countryside, but not in the group's end-of-the-day parade into the town of Iota, where a large crowd awaits them.

¹⁵The Coushatta Indians have a reservation in Elton, Louisiana, only a few miles from Basile. Cajuns in Basile and nearby towns interact with Native Americans on a regular basis; they go to school together, frequent the same businesses, and sometimes marry each other. The tribe holds an annual powwow that is well attended, and most local people have visited the Coushatta-run casino in nearby Kinder. Although Cajuns' Mardi Gras impersonations of Indians bear little resemblance to their modern-day neighbors, Basile's Wayne Moreau did learn some beadworking techniques from Coushatta artists when he was making his Indian costumes. Participants in Creole Mardi Gras runs also mask as Indians in much the same ways as Cajuns do (Ancelet 1992). (See Deloria 1998 and Green 1988 for more on playing Indian.)

¹⁶African Americans in New Orleans "mask Indian" during Carnival as members of "tribes" with names such as the Golden Star Hunters, the Wild Magnolias, and the White Eagles. This complex tradition has its own traditional songs, specific roles, and symbolic gestures. The elaborate Indian suits are hand-beaded (or rhinestoned); they can take a year to make and usually use thousands of dollars worth of plumes and stones. See Kinser 1990, among others, for more on New Orleans' Mardi Gras Indians (or "Black Indians"); see also Green (1988:43) for her reaction to this form of playing Indian.

¹⁷Bakhtin writes that in the popular medieval tradition, "woman is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent" (1968:240).

¹⁸One of Basile's male Mardi Gras, a *bon Mardi Gras* in his own right, mentioned to me that a friend had once given him a similar apron. It lifted to show off three large penises and testicles made from stuffed pantyhose, and pockets covered smaller versions. He wore his apron only on semiprivate occasions, such as when he cooked for a party. I think it is largely the very public nature of the female Mardi Gras's play that is disconcerting for some.

¹⁹Tradition (and how it is negotiated) has been the subject of considerable debate in folkloristics (see, for example, Ben Amos 1984; Finnegan 1991; Gailey 1989; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Newall 1987). Throughout this article, I use the term primarily as community members employ it to describe how and why they run Mardi Gras the way they do. As Cajuns become more concerned with cultural preservation, they are more self-consciously debating notions of tradition, culture, and heritage.

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