



(Season of Lent: February 6–March 22, 2008)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, February 10, 2008

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I. Historical Background And Documents

African American Christians, especially those who are Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Presbyterian, celebrate Lent annually reaffirming the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 3:1, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.” And 3:4, “A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.”

Lent, which is observed between Ash Wednesday and Easter, is a period of fasting, penitence, and good works done in preparation of Easter. Lent is also observed to commemorate the Passion of Jesus. (In Eastern Orthodox churches, Lent is fifty days, and in Western Christendom Lent is observed for six weeks and four days.) For Catholics the two elements that are especially characteristic of Lent are the “recalling of baptism or the preparation for it, and penance.”¹

Customs

According to the National Black Catholic Congress, some – if not all – of these customs of Lent have been observed by African American Catholics: (1) Burying of the Alleluia. The Lent ritual of Burying the Alleluia was first observed during the Middle Ages and there was an actual procession to a cemetery and a mock funeral including weeping. Modernly, worshippers carry a coffin with the alleluia in it through the church. It can be buried in the pre-Lenten period. Usually it is buried the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, on the liturgical day Quinquagesima or Shrove Tuesday, which is the day before Ash Wednesday and dug up on Easter. Many Lutherans also bury the alleluia. (2) The veiling of statues. In some Catholic congregations, the entire sanctuary was veiled to block off all consolation from this holy place. And (3) Mourning. No celebrations, such as weddings, etc., were allowed and worshippers dressed in black.²

Food

Sparse food customs also reflect Lent’s spirit of penitence. In the seventh century, Gregory the Great wrote a letter to St. Augustine of Canterbury forbidding his subjects from eating meat and any related foods such as milk, butter, and cheese during Lent’s forty-day fast. As a result, pretzels, since they are made of flour, water and salt, became popular during Lent. Hot cross buns were also baked during Lent and sold to raise money for the poor.³

Festivals And Celebrations

Inspiration for Carnival, Lundi Gras, and Mardi Gras, three festivals of good times and good food were no doubt inspired by Lent’s dour season of denial during which traditionally no parties were allowed to be held and many foods, such as meat, were forbidden. Carnival, the first of the festivals, comes from two Italian words carne and vale, which means to remove meat.⁴ Carnival begins twelve days after Christmas on January 6, and ends on Mardi Gras, which falls exactly forty-one days before Easter.

Lundi Gras, which is French for “Fat Monday,” is the second festival. This French tradition began in New Orleans in 1874, eighteen years after the beginning of Carnival in America. It supplemented the already existing Carnival activities. Lundi Gras is observed the day before Fat Tuesday or Shrove Tuesday (Pancake Day to the English) and is also a day of festivals, fireworks, and parties.⁵

Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville, the French explorer, brought Mardi Gras to America in 1699. Mardi Gras had been celebrated in Paris since the Middle Ages. He honored his country’s festival by naming the site of his camp, which was established on March 3, 1699, the date upon which Mardi Gras was celebrated in France, on the west bank of the

Mississippi River, Point du Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras celebrations soon followed: Mobile, AL in 1702; Biloxi, MS in 1720; and New Orleans in 1723. Today, Mardi Gras is also celebrated in a few American cities that do not have a French Catholic heritage.⁶

Mardi Gras is derived from French and means “Fat Tuesday,” (it is also known as Shrove Tuesday).⁷ Although the term Mardi Gras is often used to describe the days and weeks preceding Fat Tuesday, it only falls forty-six days before Easter or the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday when the forty-day penitential season of Lent begins. It is the culmination of the Carnival Season. As the final festival and last day of Carnival, it too is celebrated with numerous parades and balls.

Mardi Gras in Contemporary African American Culture

African Americans are heirs to a rich Mardi Gras and Lundi Gras heritage. Mobile’s African America Mardi Gras societies include The Order of the Doves, which was founded in 1894; The Infant Mystics, the second oldest society that continues to parade and which introduced electric floats in 1929; and The Colored Carnival Association, which was founded and held its first parade in 1939 and later changed its name to the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association. New Orleans’s first African American Mardi Gras secret society, The Original Illinois Club, was founded in 1896. One of the Crescent City’s latest African American Mardi Gras societies is the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, which boasts over five hundred members and has hosted the Lundi Gras Festival for the past sixteen years. This year’s celebration will be held Monday, February 4, 2008. Local and world-renowned entertainers will perform on three stages and a host of food vendors will serve such traditional dishes as “crawfish pie, shrimp Creole, file gumbo, alligator sausage, Jamaican chicken, crawfish bread, barbecue ribs, seafood pasta, catfish po-boys, peach cobbler, pecan pie, and many more New Orleans delicacies.”⁸

Mobile and New Orleans Mardi Gras’ have parades honoring African American royalty. Since 1939, King Elexis I has been chosen by the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association to rule over the festivities of the city’s African American community. According to New Orleans author Jim Davis, “In 1809 [King] Zulu appeared as a parody to Rex [the White King].” The Zulu King held a banana stalk scepter. He arrived on an oyster lugger instead of a steamboat.” This year King Zulu will arrive aboard a U.S. Coast Guard Cutter. Known as “Zulu, the most Wise,” he bequests fun, frivolity and merriment upon his subjects. In 1949, Louis Armstrong was the King Zulu.⁹

II. Prose And Poetic Excerpts

Heaven Bound and In the Rapture, two African American religious dramas, provide a unique cultural look at Jesus’ temptation by the devil as told in Lenten scriptures, Matthew 4:1-11, which begins (v. 1), “Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.” And ends (v. 11), “Then the devil leaveth him, and behold angels came and ministered unto him.” (New Revised Standard Version).

In both folk dramas, Satan is a central character. Indeed, much of the action and resulting humor that takes place in these respective works affirms the witty African American proverb: “Old Satan lubs to dodge ‘roun’ ‘mung de crowd at de night meetin’.”¹⁰

Heaven Bound was first performed on February 17, 1930, at the Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Lula B. Jones and Nellie L. Davis, members of the church choir, wrote the play with the hope of raising funds for the church.¹¹

In the Rapture was initially performed during the 1960s in Indianapolis, Indiana. Mrs. Margarine Hatcher, a loving matriarch who was inspired by Shirley Caesar’s recording of In the Rapture, wrote the play.¹² Both dramas portray Satan as a humorous trickster figure, who is always busy trying to tempt or trick a struggling pilgrim to leave the path of righteousness and follow him. Heaven Bound’s devil is dressed in a red suit, complete with horns and a tail. In the Rapture’s devil is dressed in tuxedo pants and a shirt. Both characters carry scepters. Among Heaven Bound’s characters are The Striver, The Hypocrite, The Wayward Girl, and The Christian Soldier. Two central characters in In the Rapture are The Mountain Climber, and The Pilgrim who begins the play dressed in an expensive suit, but is reduced to wearing a raggedy overall suit – with the sign The Devil Made Me Do It.” – pinned to his back. This humorous quality is absent from the Gospel of Matthew’s portrayal of Satan.

Life as a journey is the other major theme dramatized in these plays. The actors and their audiences affirm the truth of this African American proverb, “Dar’s right smart ‘ligion in a plow-handle”¹³ with their words of encouragement to the play’s weary pilgrims who struggle down the church isle to Heaven. In sum, it takes patience, vision and determination to plow successfully. A straight furrow requires going over ruts and rocks that have moved the farmer off line. But, if he remains faithful, he, like The Pilgrim, will receive his heavenly reward because he repented and persevered.

An excellent example of this belief is this slavery prayer, a version of which was quoted by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he sought to point out the progress that had been made in the Civil Rights Movement:

“Father,
 I ain’t what I want to be,
 I ain’t what I ought to be,
 I ain’t what I’m going to be,
But thank you, Father
I ain’t what I used to be.”¹⁴

III. Traditional Songs

These two African American spirituals embody the traditional religious view of life as an arduous journey filled with pitfalls and temptations.

I Am Bound for the Promised Land

I am bound for the Promised Land,
I am bound for the Promised Land,
O, won't you rise and go with me,
I am bound for the Promised Land.

When I get to Heaven I'll set and tell,
I am bound for the Promised Land,
Just how I shun the gates of Hell,
I'm bound for the Promised Land.
O, Christians, Christians be enraged,
I am bound for the Promised Land,
Old Satan in an awful rage,
I'm bound for the Promised Land.¹⁵

Inching Along

Keep a-inching along,
Keep a-inching along;
Jesus will come by and by;
Keep a-inching along
Like a poor inchworm,
Jesus will come by and by.

Twas inch by inch
I sought the Lord;
And inch by inch
He blessed my soul;
The Lord is coming to take us home,

And then our work will soon be done;
Trials and troubles are on the way,
But we must watch and always pray;
We'll inch and inch along,
And inch and inch till we get home.

Keep a-inching along,
Keep a-inching along;
Jesus will come by and by;
Keep a-inching along,
Like a poor inchworm,
Jesus will come by and by.¹⁶

IV. Possible Program Illustrations

heavenly gates; a plow; a rugged mountain; an inchworm

Notes

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3. Ibid., pp. 2-3.
4. "Carnival." Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia. Columbia University Press. 2004. Online location: www.reference.com/browse/columbia/carnival accessed 20 December 2007
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9. Davis, Jim. "The History of Mardi Gras."
10. Brewer, John Mason. American Negro Folklore. Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1968. p. 317.
11. "Heaven Bound." The New Georgia Encyclopedia. Coleman, Gregory D. 24 Jul. 2002. Online location: www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/searchresult.jsp accessed 2 January 2007
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16. Ibid.