FROM MAROONS TO MARDI GRAS:
THE ROLE OF AFRICAN CULTURAL RETENTION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THE BLACK INDIAN CULTURE OF NEW ORLEANS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After a long and storied career as a cultural arts producer and curator, I finally pursued my lifelong goal of finishing my M.A. in Ethnomusicology. I started my journey in this field nearly thirty years ago with renowned ethnomusicologist Dr. Portia Maultsby and the late Jazz educator David Baker at Indiana University-Bloomington. It was through Dr. Maultsby that I met my first mentor in African music, Zimbabwe Shona Mbira Master Ephat Mujuru. Ephat’s inspiring words to me “you have an African soul,” put me on a life-long quest to celebrate the cultural connections of the music and living arts of Africa to its diaspora. In 1989, I moved to New Orleans to immerse myself into the culture. I found that Dr. Maultsby’s pervasive focus on the importance “socio-cultural context” had prepared me well for my adventure. Through a myriad of experiences, I learned many valuable things about the history and cultural threads that bind African, Caribbean, Native American and European cultures together in the cradle of New Orleans. I worked closely with Blues and Jazz musicians and danced in second-line Jazz funerals. I have sewn Black Indian regalia, participated in drumming and ancestral rituals in Congo Square, and performed in and produced Brazilian, Cuban, Haitian and Nigerian cultural programs in New Orleans and abroad. After a ten-year hiatus in Indiana, opening the Garfield Park Arts Center for City of Indianapolis, I had an opportunity to return to New Orleans in 2008 to spearhead the New Orleans Jazz Institute at University of New Orleans. I was blessed to be positioned to continue my advocacy work for the Black Indians with Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. and the Wild Magnolias.

In 2014, I returned to my roots in Ethnomusicology at Liberty University, to fulfill the promise I made to Mujuru twenty-five years prior and to achieve my Master’s degree--an opportunity to wrap a red ribbon around my research on the Black Indian culture. My journey,
charted on a continuum with anthropology-minded masters in the field, such as Dr. Maultsby, Dr. Ruth Stone, Melville Herskovits and Alan Lomax, laid the groundwork for my success.

As ethnomusicologists, we have a unique opportunity to understand, evaluate and gain knowledge about the powerful role music plays in culture. Some of us will choose to become leaders in cultural advocacy, by promoting and maintaining the integrity of those cultures. I have spent many years as a cultural advocate for the Black Indians, and other international heritage projects and programs. As I completed my research on the origins of the Black Indian tradition, I considered what my possible contributions might be to the people who I have forged relationships with along my path.

This project is dedicated to those who have understood and supported my vision and mission. I am particularly grateful for the love and support of my “Diaspora dancer” daughter Colette Williams, who has been at my side and on this journey with me since birth. I thank Dr. Katherine Morehouse and Dr. Paul Rumrill at Liberty University, and my husband Maynard Eaton, who encouraged me to remain steadfast in my goal to be excellent in my craft.

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ABSTRACT

After a three hundred year journey from the continent, African cultural retention remains at the core of the Black Indian masking tradition of New Orleans. Prior research from progenitors in anthropology and ethnomusicology, focusing on African cultural retention, include the ground-breaking research and ethnographies of Robert Farris Thompson, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Kalamu Ya Salaam, Michael P. Smith, Margaret Thompson Drewel, Stephen Wehmeyer, Jason Berry and others, have established a solid foundation for research on African influences and retentions in expressive folk cultures, laying a firm foundation for this project.

The author’s insider experiences within the Black Indian tradition are underscored by several field interviews conducted with Chiefs and tribal members, culture bearers, elders, curators and spiritualists. Through correlative research findings and examples relating African diaspora dance, music and regalia to the Black Indian tradition, the author has created a cross-cultural history that is based in fact, proving that the story of the Black “Mardi Gras” Indian transcends myth and legend.

The provocative findings of the author throughout research for this project clearly carry a common thread. The phenomenological experiences related by culture bearers in the tradition exhibit ability for Black Indians to transcend the physical into the spiritual realm during masking, channeling the energy and deeply embedded narrative of their ancestors. As a direct link to African masking, music, spirituality and rituals, maintained after three hundred years of cultural retention in America, “masking Indian” is a simultaneously historical and contemporary manifestation of “embodied memory” and cultural resistance, demonstrated through a unique and expressive masquerade ritual.
DEDICATED TO: Big Chief Theodore Emile “Bo” Dollis of the WILD MAGNOLIAS.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Over the last three hundred years, New Orleans, established as one of the largest ports of entry for African slaves into the Americas in the early 1700s, has become a cradle for a unique culture informed by African, European, and Native American influences. As a result, the social and religious context of New Orleans’ cultural traditions became intimately intertwined.

Much of the Black carnival traditions in New Orleans mirror deep roots in African Egungun and Sogoninkun, as well as other masquerade rituals, punctuated by music, which contains Senegalese “bamboula” rhythmic structure and a hybrid of African and Native American linguistic characteristics. Borne from this cross-cultural synthesis is an art form celebrated and perpetuated by a secret society of masked African-American “Indians” called Mardi Gras Indians or, in contemporary times, Black Indians.

Statement of the Problem

Up to this point, not much research has been conclusive about the true origins of Black Indian culture. Some researchers believe it is an art form created from the imaginations of maroon slaves who “masked” as Native Americans to escape plantations, traveling up the Bayou to join other slaves who eventually integrated into life with Indian tribes.

Other researchers have disputed whether Black Indian music is truly derived from Senegambian traditions in Africa, or the drums and chants heard in the villages in southeast Louisiana and Mississippi. Several ethnographers have suggested that the tradition stems from the Black Cowboys in the Buffalo Bill Wild West shows in the late 1800s, as specifically cited in the African American Registry:
An appearance in town of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show in the 1880s was said to have drawn considerable attention and increased the interest in masking as Indians for Mardi Gras. When Caribbean communities started to spring up in New Orleans, their culture was incorporated into the costumes, dances and music made by the “Indians”.

(AAR, web)

Research Question

This project is rooted within vast personal research and first-hand “insider” experience working within the Black Indian cultural community. This formative research, supported by the qualitative findings of Africanists and ethnographers over the last fifty years, presents a strong, credible, relevant platform for the theory that Black Indian traditions truly reflect African cultural retentions.

With the recent passing of the “oldest living Black Indian” Flag Boy Ike Edwards and music legend Big Chief Bo Dollis, recipient of the National Endowment of the Arts National Heritage Award, in addition to portrayals of Black Indians in television shows such as HBO’s “Treme,” and more recently, a Beyoncé video and in VOGUE Magazine, a spotlight has been focused on this culture like never before. An accurate picture needs to now be painted of the origins and significance of the Black Indian tradition, its cultural diasporic resonance, and ultimately, its role as one of America’s most unique “African “cross-cultural art forms.

Contemporary examples of the tradition, such as Victor Harris’ African masking in Mardi Gras masquerade of the Spirit of the Fi Yi Yi tribe in New Orleans, mirror ethnographic studies conducted by authors such as Margaret Thompson-Drewel. Her description of Yoruba rituals, music, Egungun regalia and carnival/procession traditions, directly correlate to Harris’ tradition and other tribal regalia, procession styles, masking, and music traditions found in New Orleans.

(Thompson-Drewel: 1992)

In addition, Black Indian traditions are cross-culturally supported by the direct music and linguistic comparisons of Indian chants and lyrics outlined in Drew Hinshaw’s ethnographic
experience in Ghana, West Africa. Hinshaw’s study references a Mardi Gras Indian chant/song “Iko Iko” to draw linguistic correlations and meaning retained through contemporary applications and musical expressions in New Orleans. *(Hinshaw: 2009)*

Recognizing that many cultural traditions are born from resistance and adaptation, the Black Indian tradition has also retained African ritual and religious elements over time. Traditional African spiritual practices maintained in Black Indian rituals are fully supported by the correlative findings of Steven Wehmeyer, Jason Berry, Margaret Thompson Drewel, Michael P. Smith, Robert Farris Thompson and others. These ethnographers illuminate the strong connections of Yoruba and Congolese influence, syncretism with Native American icons such as “Black Hawk,” and syncretic tributes to Saint Joseph and other Saints from the cosmology of the Catholic Church. *(Wehmeyer: 2000)*

Overall, research presented in this project illustrates the important role that African cultural retentions and spirituality, over three hundred years since slavery was instituted in Louisiana, have played a distinct role in creating and perpetuating the traditional folk art-form of Black Indian masking. The research also demonstrates the present day trends and evolution.
of contemporary Black Indians, their struggle to maintain an identity rooted within African traditions, while communicating it through popular cultural platforms in music, performance and social media.

**GLOSSARY OF TERMS:**

There are several key concepts and terms contained in these studies, which are discussed below:

--*Mardi Gras or Black Indian*--

The "Mardi Gras Indians,” contemporarily regarded as Black Indian tribes of New Orleans, are the oldest cultural organizations surviving from the original African tribes which were brought into New Orleans during slavery days. The tribes are particularly noted for preserving and retaining African "dress art" and musical heritage in the New World. Through this unique art form, Black Indians also attribute their regalia and culture as a way to pay tribute to the Native American tribes who aided them in their escape from plantations and often intermarried with the slaves in Colonial Louisiana.

--*Masking Tradition*--

In traditional cultures around the world, masks are used in masquerades that form part of religious ceremonies enacted to communicate with spirits and ancestors, frequently passed down within a family through many generations. Such an artist holds a respected position in tribal society because of the work that he or she creates, embodying not only complex craft techniques but also spiritual/social and symbolic knowledge. Black Indians in New Orleans who “mask Indian” are part of a secret masquerade society, cultivated over the last three hundred years.

--*African Cultural Retention*--

Through elaborate masking ritual, music and dance, the Black Indians of New Orleans have demonstrated African cultural retention. This is the act of retaining the culture of Africans,
away from the Continent, especially when there is reason to believe that the culture, through inaction, may be lost. Masking Indian has become a fierce and fervent expression of African roots, heritage and cultural resistance in New Orleans.

---Cross-cultural---

Cross-cultural relates to various demonstrated forms of interactivity between members of disparate cultural groups. Black Indian culture in New Orleans demonstrates a cross-cultural synthesis of African, Native American and Caribbean attributes and features within its masking tradition.

---Maroon---

Many Black Indians in New Orleans claim to have descended from maroon slaves. Black Indians and Spiritualists often celebrate the legacy and history of maroon slaves, as a foundation for continued cultural resistance against the oppressor. The term maroon derives from the Spanish word cimarrón, which means "feral animal, fugitive, runaway". Maroons were African refugees that escaped slavery in the Americas and formed independent settlements. The term can also be applied to their descendants.

---Juan San Maló---

One of the most highly venerated Maroon leaders is Juan San Maló, a fierce maroon leader who emerged in the 1760s-80s as a threat to the Spanish social system in Southeastern Louisiana. Also known as: Saint Maló, Saint Marron, Saint Maroon

---Black Hawk---

Another icon of cultural resistance for the Black Indians is Black Hawk. Ma-ka-tai-me-sha-kia-kiak, or Black Sparrow Hawk, was born in 1767 at Saukenuk, the principal city of the
Sauk tribe located along the Rock River in Illinois. Black Hawk was born into the Thunder clan. During his life, particularly in the Black Hawk War in the 1830’s, aided by several other tribes in an effort to protecting tribal lands lost to the United States, Black Hawk became a noted warrior and symbol of resistance. Mother Leafy Anderson, is credited for bringing Black Hawk to New Orleans as a spirit guide in the early 1900’s. When she died, Mother Catherine Seals carried on his tradition as head of the Spiritualist Church, relating to Black Hawk as her spirit guide, as well.

--Egunun Masquerade--

A kind of masking ritual belonging to the Yoruba of Nigeria, where participants wear elaborate costumes consisting of cloth decorated with ribbons and mirrors, which represent the spirits of the ancestors.

--Senegambian Slaves--

In the early 1700s over 9,000 enslaved Africans arrived from Senegal and Gambia to the Gulf region of the United States, especially Louisiana. These slaves, identified tribally as Bambara or Mandingo people, constituted forty percent of the population arriving from Africa.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to the direct diasporic influences, which inform the African cultural retentions found within various aspects of the music, regalia, spirituality and masking of the Black Indian tradition. Current research conducted for this project identified that the origins of these retentions are rooted in the cultural foundations of West African countries, specifically Nigeria, Benin, Ghana and Senegal. Traveling to all of these destinations to conduct research to substantiate these research claims would have been ideal. However, as funding was not made available for this research trip, documentation of traditional Yoruba masking traditions
maintained in *Oyotunji Village* in Gullah Country in South Carolina was utilized. I then returned to New Orleans to conclude research activities. The intensity of the research plan was imperative, as there is a lack of current qualitative research by ethnographers, and a virtual absence of holistic understanding about the tradition within the Black Indian Community. While these issues might have been perceived as a challenge, the element of discovery from both sides blossomed into an organically charged exchange.

**Assumptions**

The Black Indian tradition is a secret society, and as such, culture bearers in this society rightfully covet the foundations of this tradition, which may include various aspects of the sewing techniques of the masquerade, the meanings of language and songs, and the rites and rituals, which constitute the act of masking. While it was somewhat difficult to elicit an honest and thorough response during direct inquiry and investigation with some tribal members and culture bearers, it was important to also interview producers and curators of the tradition for a more balanced and well-rounded perspective. It cannot be assumed that all participants in the research would reveal the more spiritual and personal aspects of their experiences in masking. It was gratifying, however, that most participants were genuine and authentic in their interviews, and common threads and themes emerged during the course of direct inquiry.

In addition, personal phenomenological investigation and research, in tandem with subsequent documentary gathering of images, footage and musical samples visually and aurally illuminated and underscored information drawn from the interview material gathered during the individual inquiry sessions with research subjects. The goal was to conduct a thorough and comprehensive study of the Black Indian tradition, by creatively utilizing whatever means and resources were present in the environment. While definitive information was being sought for
the outcomes of the project, the veritably amorphous nature of New Orleans itself required that an organic, open-minded approach was necessary during field research activities.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

During the formative stages of research for this project, well-regarded research principles based in African cultural retention, established by ethnomusicologists and ethnographers such as Kalamu Ya Salaam, Michael P. Smith, Margaret Thompson Drewel, David Elliot Draper, Jason Berry, Andrew Kaslow, as well as extensive research by Africanists Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Melville Herskovits, Alan Lomax and others were utilized. In tandem with this research, first-hand field research and interviews conducted with Black Indian tribal members, culture bearers, curators and elders conducted for this study aim to prove that Black Indian spirituality, dance, music, and regalia are greatly influenced by African and its Diaspora’s cultural foundations. The goal of this research was to propel the story of the Mardi Gras Indian beyond myth and legend, and to create a cross-cultural history that is based in fact.

Port of Entry-African Culture & Religion

The majority of slaves transported to French Colonial Louisiana in the early 1700s came through Goree Island, near the port of St. Louis, Senegal, which was the first permanent French Colonial settlement, established by French Traders in 1659. When Governor Perrier and his trade organization “Company of the Indies” came to prominence in Louisiana in the early 1700s, by the 1720’s slaves of Senegambian, Nigerian, and Congolese origin were a major export through trade routes in Haiti into the Port of Louisiana in New Orleans. Along with the slaves came their unique culture, spiritual identity, and religion. *(Midlo-Hall 1992, 65)*

French Colonialists had a unique approach to slaves and were slightly more liberal than their British counterparts in allowing Africans to maintain their cultural traditions, many of
which were rooted within Yoruba and Congo contexts. The Yoruba are an ancient group of people in West Africa, residing in the regions of Togo, Benin and Nigeria. In addition to their dynamic musical language and colorful culture, the Yoruba people are known for IFA, a polytheistic religion and divination system, which features ancestral worship and the veneration of a pantheon of over 200 gods called orishas.

Much like the Greek gods, orishas co-exist in both earthly and celestial realms. Orishas exemplify the relationship of nature and the heavens to man. In addition, much like the deities found in similar religions and cultures, such as the Hindu gods in India or the Chinese deities, worshipping them is believed to give man a chance to know his destiny. It is also believed that after making the proper sacrifices to these gods, he can even change his life’s course. The cosmology of deities from Nigerian and Congo religions rooted in Yoruba IFA, such as Vodou and Palo Mayombe, were syncretized with the Catholic Saints, which allowed slaves to maintain their spiritual paths.

This was further augmented by the sharing of cultural traditions, drumming, and dance, as slaves were free to gather on Sundays, as early as 1724, in various meeting grounds or “Place des Negres” located near the Bayou St. John in New Orleans. Much later after the French sold Louisiana to the United States, slaves continued the traditions in a space “back of town” just outside the Vieux Carre, the “old French Quarter” in the “Place Congo,” which eventually became known as Congo Square.

As time went by, many visitors started to attend the Sunday slave gatherings in Congo Square to witness the elaborate costuming, drumming, and dances that survived over time, including the Bamboula, Calinda, Congo Carabine, and Juba. Because drumming was allowed
in Congo Square, the rhythms have laid a pervasive foundation for all of New Orleans musical art-forms, including New Orleans Jazz funerals, second-lines and Mardi Gras Indian processions.

Brotherhood in Congo Square: Africans & Native Americans Unite

Congo Square was also a trading and gathering place for African and Haitian slaves, as well as slaves who were from regional Native American tribes such as the Chitimachas and Houma Indians. Since the early 1700s, Native tribes had embraced and accepted maroon slaves, who often masked as Indians to escape plantations and travel up the bayous and waterways to freedom. What many do not recognize is that the Chitimacha people were subjugated and
enslaved by the French, after having owned a majority of land in Louisiana prior to European contact. According to tribal history:

…the Chitimacha were known as the most powerful tribe between Texas and Florida. Iberville, an early French explorer, encountered the Chitimacha and one of their subdivisions, the Washa along the shores of the Mississippi River in 1699. In 1706, as a response to slave raids and French aggressions, a group of Chitimacha killed St. Cosme, a priest and slave owner, and several members of his party, who were missionaries to the Natchez Tribe. Bienville responded to this by convincing other tribes to help them make war on the Chitimacha. This war lasted until 1718 when a Chitimacha Chief met Bienville in the fledgling city of New Orleans. A treaty establishing peace was signed and a ceremony was held, which ended the long war in which the majority of the tribal members were annihilated. In the twelve years of conflict, many Chitimacha were forced into slavery and were the most enslaved of any population in Louisiana during that period. (Chitimacha-Web: 2017)

The Natchez Indians and maroon slaves continued this resistance, being involved in many slave uprisings along the bayou, a powerful dual force that eventually overturned the efforts of the Company of the Indies by 1729, in the Natchez Revolt. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall describes the swift ferocity of this union in her book entitled “Africans in Colonial Louisiana”:

By 1729, the slave trade to French Louisiana was drawing to a close. The plans that Director Brue has described as “so beautiful, so solid, and so approved that it has become the strongest and most powerful company in the world” collapsed in the face of revolts against that Atlantic coast of the Senegal concession and along the Senegal River, revolts of the captifs aboard the slave ships, and a devastating revolt of the Natchez Indians, who acted in cooperation with recently arrived slaves from Africa. The Natchez Revolt wiped out the company’s ambitious tobacco settlement and about one tenth of the French population of Louisiana. Many of the surviving colonists left and those who remained were in desperate straights. In January 1731, the Company of the Indies formally returned its Louisiana concession to the crown of France.

(Midlo Hall 1992, 86)

Midlo Hall’s documented narrative describing the strength of the union between the Natchez Indians and African slaves is unparalleled in historical archives, even those currently contained at the Natchez Indian site today. While this time of interaction and commonality
between Natchez, Chitimacha and African slaves can be referenced, many scholars on the subject over the last forty years have failed to acknowledge this historical reality. In his article entitled “Mardi Gras Indians, Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans,” George Lipsitz fashions a reference to Native and African Cultural influences on the tradition but ultimately detaches those influences from the origins of the contemporary Black Indians:

It (the Mardi Gras Indian Tradition) presents visual and narrative references to Native American Indians, but it bears little resemblance to genuine Indian celebrations and ceremonies. It draws its determinate modes of expression from African culture and philosophy, but it is not a purely African ritual. Instead, it projects a cultural indeterminacy, picking and choosing from many traditions in order to fashion performances and narratives suitable for arbitrating an extraordinarily complex identity.

(Lipsitz 1988, 102).

Here Lipsitz suggests that the tradition is far removed from any meaningful cultural, visual, or musical clues tied to either Native or African traditions. Contrary to Lipsitz, this project research asserts that the very freedom of expression that was allowed to live and breathe in Congo Square three hundred years ago made it possible to retain and eventually synthesize these influences into a tradition that exists today.

**Cultural Retention: Music, Language, Masking, Procession, Ritual and Spirituality**

The retention of music and dance that survived and thrived in Congo Square could be substantiated by the early work of Alan Lomax’s cross-cultural project, called Cantometrics, which was begun under the directorship of Lomax at Columbia University in 1961. Even though Lomax’s work has been challenged and criticized by many ethnomusicologists over the years, his suggestion that music’s ability to imbed and maintain cultural memory is provocative and relevant in the argument for African retention. Lomax asserted that music has the power to assist man in retaining cultural characteristics over time.
As a working hypothesis, I propose the common-sense notion that music somehow expresses emotion; therefore, when a distinctive and consistent musical style lives in a culture or runs through several cultures, one can posit the existence of a distinctive set of emotional needs or drives that are somehow satisfied or evoked by this music. If such a musical style occurs with only a limited pattern of variation in the similar cultural setting and over a long period of time, one may assume that a stable expressive and emotional pattern has existed in group A in area B through time T. Thus we might look forward to a scientific musicology that could speak with some precision about formative emotional attitudes pervading cultures and operating through history (Lomax 1961: 425).

As Lomax describes above, the powerful memory that makes cultural retention viable could be considered integral to the continuation of ancestral ties and traditions when evaluating the elements found in contemporary Black Indian culture.

The work of renowned ethnomusicologists such as Melville Herskovits, Allen Lomax, and Alan P. Merriam have contributed prolific research over the years that support retention theories, demonstrating African music, dance, and language characteristics have not only survived but remained virtually the same over distance and time. Similarly, after preliminary research on Yoruba retention in Brazil, Herskovits further encouraged his colleagues to investigate retention and similarities between African and African-American music. Their collective investigations included several areas of analysis, which included counting of prominent interval positions, expression of melodic range, melodic direction, and modal structure (pentatonic).

Based on the stark similarities in Herskovits, Lomax and Merriam’s collective analyses of both African Music and African American music, anthropologist Norma McLeod concluded in her overview of their research, “It is now clear that New World Negro Music has retained its African character remarkably well” (McLeod 1974, 103). In his cross-cultural evaluation of the music of Africans and African-Americans, Lomax found that his cross-cultural analysis of the two music cultures was nearly identical:
In most respects, the African and Afro-American performance profiles are identical and form a unique pair in our world sample. The social organization of the musical group, the degree of integration of the musical group, the layout of the rhythm, the levels of embellishment, and the voice quality sets conform to the same ratings in both Negro Africa and Negro communities in the New World.

(Lomax 1960, 433)

Lomax’s comparison may be applied to the retentions found in New Orleans as well. The syncopated Bamboula rhythm from the Bambara people of Senegal, and call and response song forms have served as the foundation of virtually all Black Indian chants and music, further influencing popular Rhythm and Blues in the twentieth Century.

Later in his essay, Lipsitz vacillates in his position that Mardi Gras Indian performance and music may just be influenced on some level by an essentially African cultural approach, leaning toward a more Lomax-like evaluation:

...the key to their collective story rests in more than specific words and images; it comes from the aesthetics of their performance. The Mardi Gras Indian narrative is eloquent and compelling because the forms used to convey it correspond to its basic message, and because the daily lived experience of its adherents reinforces its core values. In its aesthetics, the Mardi Gras Indian narrative resonates with the culture and philosophy of African music.

(Lipsitz 1988, 104).

Musical Influence on Jazz & Rhythm and Blues

These African-rooted influences in turn influenced the early Jazz music created by New Orleans Creole piano maverick Jelly Roll Morton, who shared chants of a Black Indian with Lomax at the Library of Congress in 1938. Morton, who grew up in the Creole neighborhood of the 7th Ward, purported to have experience running with an Indian Gang as a “Spy Boy,” the position who runs ahead of the gang to alert the rest of Indians of any potential “humbug” or danger ahead. (YouTube: Jelly Roll Morton)
In 1949, New Orleans R&B legend Dave Bartholomew incorporated Indian chants into his tune “Carnival Day,” and Professor Longhair crafted the beloved carnival classic “Big Chief”. In 1971, the Wild Magnolias Mardi Gras Indians paired with New Orleans R&B veteran Willie “Tee” Turbinton on “Handa Wanda”. In 1974, New Orleans funk artists “The Meters” used an Indian chant in one of their hits “Hey Pocky Way” later recorded by the Neville Brothers. (John Sinclair website, 2006)

**Language**

African cultural retention is certainly evident in the linguistic characteristics of Black Indian chants. One of the most widely known Black Indian chants translated and recognized in contemporary song is “Iko Iko”. The song was originally recorded by James “Sugar Boy” Crawford in 1953 for Chess Records as “Jock-a-Mo”, the lyrics of which were inspired by Black Indian Chants. In 1965, New Orleans girl group “The Dixie Cups” recorded a version of the song as well. The lyrics are as follows:

*Iko, iko
Iko iko an de
Jock-a-mo fee no ah na nay
Jock-a-mo fee na ne*

*My spyboy met your spyboy
Sittin’ by the fire
My spyboy told your spyboy:
"I'm gonna set your flag on fire"

*Talkin’ bout
Hey now, Hey now
Iko iko an de
Jock-a-mo fee no ah na nay
Jock-a-mo fee na ne*

*Look at my queen all dressed in red
Iko iko an de
I bet you five dollars she'll kill you dead*
I was sitting by the shore in Ghana, watching an extravagant parade, when I heard a chant that rung my eardrums like a bell. “Iko, Iko!” To which the nation’s Ewe speakers would say “aayé!” It belongs to no particular language, Iko—and the Ashanti, Fante, Ewe spell it “ayekoo”—but that swallowed ‘I’ and soft, clucking ‘ko’ sound uncannily the same. “It means well done or congratulations,” says Dr. Evershed Amuzu, a social linguistics lecturer at the University of Ghana, who proceeds to pull a phenomenal
Having professed no prior knowledge of the song, he takes hold of the lyrics sheet and sings the chorus—flubbing the rhythm, but more or less nailing the melody

(Hinshaw, 2009: Offbeat Magazine)

The discovery that the melody sung by Professor Amuzu is nearly identical to Black Indian chant “Iko Iko” indicates that a level of musical and linguistic retention from a traditional Ewe parade song is significant. Hinshaw further underscores the importance of the discovery of West African and Haitian language and musical characteristics and retentions present in “Iko Iko” through citing the research of musicologist Ned Sublette:

....Sublette has backed the idea that the chorus might have roots in Haitian slave culture, considering that the rhythms of Mardi Gras Indians are nearly indistinguishable from the Haitian Kata rhythm. Yaquimo, he has also noted, was a common name among Taino people, who inhabited Haiti in the early years of the slave trade. "Jakamo Fi Na Ye" is also, whether coincidentally or not, the phrase "The black cat is here" in Bambara, a West African Mandingo language. (Ibid)

In 2011, in a conversation with Ghanaian musician and ethnomusicologist Bernard Woma, a mutual colleague of IFA Babalowo Tony Artis, Woma spoke on the “Iko Iko” linguistic comparisons. He claims that the words “Iko Iko, An-de” are very similar to “Ago, Ago, a-me, “ a call and response phrase meaning, “Pay attention, pay attention/I’m paying attention” Jock-a-mo fee no ah na ne/Jock-a-mo fee na ne” is translated to “God is the Master of all people”. (Williams, 2011)

In Dahomey and Yoruba influenced vodun practices, which evolved through Haiti and converged with the spiritual traditions of African slaves imported directly from the continent into New Orleans during the advent of slavery, the song’s lyrics take an even more literal meaning. In Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Joseph Murphy’s study entitled, “Creole Religions of the
Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo,” Murphy offers a possible meaning of the song from the perspective of vodun influences in Haiti’s firmly entrenched African spiritual system.

Voodoo practitioners would recognize many aspects of the song as being about spirit possession. The practitioner, the horse, waves a flag representing a certain god to literally flag down that god into himself or herself. Setting a flag on fire is a way of cursing someone. The song also mentions a man dressed in green who either has a change in personality or is in some way not what he seems to be. That would be recognized in Voodoo as a person being possessed by a spirit from the peaceful Rada realm who has a preference for green clothes and has love magic or fertility as their tell-tale characteristics. The man in the song who is dressed in red, and who is being sent after someone to kill them, would likely be a person possessed by a spirit from the vengeful Petwo realm who has a preference for red clothing and who has revenge or some other destructive quality among their characteristics. (Olmos-Murphy 2011, 116)

Based on Murphy’s example above, the street-level engagement on Mardi Gras between gangs of Black Indians described in “Iko Iko” could possibly be reflected as a spiritual/ritual retention from Haitian and African cultural influences. The re-enactment of literal acts of warfare illustrated in the narrative of “Iko Iko” reinforces real life battles referred to as “hum-bug” and blood shed that took place with Indians on New Orleans streets until the 1950’s.

As Lomax and Herskovits discovered in an earlier example of Yoruba language retention in Brazil, it is possible that through complex processes of transculturation, language, rhythm and melody can survive through space and time to be expressed almost the exact same way in a different socio-cultural context. The slaves had the ability to maintain their musical and cultural expressions through their Sunday celebrations in Congo Square for the last three hundred years, much the same as Black Indians do at Sunday “Indian Practices” or on the streets on Mardi Gras morning in contemporary society.
Anyone who has truly been accepted into the inner circle of this secretive culture has witnessed the ritual of “Indian Practice,” an elaborate syncopated theatrical mix of warrior dance, tambourine, bass drum, and chanting. This is a ritual that allows Chiefs and their chosen tribal members (“Wild men,” “Flag boys,” “Spy boys,” “Big Queens,” and “Little Queens,”) to get ready by practicing dance and songs for the masquerade “procession” through the streets of New Orleans on Mardi Gras morning. The Chiefs particularly practice a fluid warrior dance, which is employed mainly when they meet one another on the streets (Williams, 2009).

In David Elliot Draper’s 1973 dissertation, written at New Orleans’ Tulane University, “The Mardi Gras Indians: The Ethnomusicology of Black Associations in New Orleans,” the author provides an academic overview of the thirty-eight tribes of Uptown and Downtown Black Indian gangs in contemporary New Orleans. The author includes descriptions of Black Indian masking traditions on Mardi Gras Day, as well as the tribes parade activities on Saint Joseph's Day (March 19) and the Sunday nearest to Saint Joseph's Day ("Super Sunday").

One of the earliest documents written on this enigmatic subject, Draper’s poignant description of the essence of the masking tradition is compelling.

...in their rehearsals and performances as Indians they become part of a community of resistance and self-affirmation. They treat life as precious, celebrating its joys and pleasures, even while mourning the dead. Their song lyrics, costumes, speech, and dances all reinforce the same values-grace, strength, elegance, precision, happiness, composure, and dignity.

(Draper 1973, 14).

**Procession**

During the funeral procession for Big Chief Bo Dollis at *Xavier University* in January 2015, many Chiefs came out in full regalia to pay respects to the venerable Bo, who during his career, made Mardi Gras Indian music and culture known world-wide from *Lincoln Center* to
the Kennedy Center, and on stages in Japan, France, and Berlin. The dignity, reverence, and celebratory aspects that Draper speaks of were all evident the day of Big Chief’s funeral (Youtube, Big Chief’s Funeral Procession, 2015).

The art of the masking procession is also reflective of the masquerade traditions found in Egungun procession for the Ancestors in Yoruba culture in Nigeria. Margaret Thompson Drewel has extensively chronicled these traditions throughout her book, Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency, written during her extensive fieldwork in Nigeria during the 1980s.

Drewel speaks specifically of several different types of egungun ancestral funeral traditions. The amount of time that passes before the funeral often indicates the stature and importance of the person in the community. Likewise, the amount of revelry in tribute to the person that takes place in the community also signals the overall societal impact of that person. These principles as applied during the ritual of Ojo Isinku are described by Drewel:

*During Ojo Isinku, the family collects money from relatives to buy gin and food for all the funeral guests. The first public ceremony is a spectacle of play and dance. Musicians are hired to accompany the relatives of the deceased around town as they sing and dance in honor of the family. The more play taking place throughout the village shows the social importance of the deceased. Therefore, the more play the higher the status. (Drewel 1992,42)*

Reading this made me reflect on Big Chief Bo Dollis’ funeral procession and arrangements, as his funeral was moved back one week to specifically allow for augmented second-line processions, parties, and musical tributes in the community, honoring him before his funeral took place. In New Orleans, funeral processions are very similar to Ghanaian or Yoruba Egungun processions. The first procession traveling to the funeral is reserved and somber, whereas the “Second-line” or the second procession after the funeral is jubilant, joyful, and filled with music. The Second-line parade is reminiscent of the Yoruba “Irenku” parade, utilized for the deceased.
During Irenku, family and friends parade through the town celebrating their success in performing a proper burial, and also to ask for the deceased’s approval. Music and dancing takes place throughout the day in a display much more elaborate than the first parade. The parade stops at certain spots along the way such as at the compounds of the relatives where the spirit is expected to stay.

(Drewel 1992, 44)

Big Chief Bo’s funeral procession was much like a Nigerian Irenku celebration; the Chiefs were dressed in large feather and beaded suits, some with faces partially covered (reminiscent of egungun masquerade), and the second-line brass bands were playing throughout the procession while many people were chanting and dancing to the beat of drums and tambourines. The celebratory feeling of such events, coupled with the intense spirit-filled veneration of ancestors at the New Orleans funeral celebrations draw several key comparisons to Nigerian Irenku processions. In the photograph taken of Big Chief Demond Melancon (below) leading music at the funeral procession for Big Chief Bo Dollis in January 2015, African visual clues appear, such as the double-sided “tomahawk” which resembles the double-sided axe of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning. (YouTube: Bo Dollis Funeral)
Masking: My Big Chief Wears a Golden Crown

There was a definitive spiritual marker in history on June 28, 2005, two months to the day before Hurricane Katrina devastated the City of New Orleans. The sudden death (heart attack) of Yellow Pocahontas’ Big Chief Tootie Montana, often referred to as “the Chief of Chiefs,” occurred in the New Orleans City Council chambers, during his speech about police brutality on St. Joseph’s night. Montana, weary of the historic violence on the streets during Indian masquerades, had become a leader in the tradition by advocating the removal of the Indian “battle” off the streets, creating an artistic competition, many refer to now as “the battle of needle and thread”. Montana set a precedent of distinction at Carnival for the Indian whose suit was the excellent creation, making him “the Prettiest.” (Ya Salaam. 1997).

Lisa Katzman’s documentary “Tootie’s Last Suit” not only documents the last suit made by the man whose creations were placed as cultural objects in the Smithsonian, but the filmmaker also provides a glimpse of the familial dynamics of a Chief that descends from a lineage of what is believed to be the “first Mardi Gras Indian” (Ibid). Montana’s inclusion in the Smithsonian signaled a paradigm shift in the value and importance placed on an African-derived folk art tradition within a Western defined cultural institution. This may have been attributed to the richness of his lineage and depth of his cultural influences as an artist, drawing upon the embodied memories of his ancestors.

In Maurice Martinez’s 1976 film “Black Indians of New Orleans,” he points to the origin of the masking tradition as having started with Montana’s great uncle Becate Batiste:

In the 1880s, a young man of Indian and African descent masked on Carnival Day as an Indian. This man was the great uncle of Allison “Tuddy” [sic] Montana, today’s Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas tribe. Despite the uncertainty as to a specific date and the lack of definitive information about who else and how many were in the first gang, most knowledgeable observers (ranging in outlooks from Martinez to Smith) suggest the late 1880s as the birth of Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans. (Martinez: 1976)
Martinez’ information is not entirely accurate. Tootie was descended from Creole French Haitian ancestors, as he was known to incorporate French Patois in his street calls with other Indians. The connective thread with Haiti surfaces again in Kalamu Ya Salaam’s book “He’s the Prettiest:” A Tribute to Big Chief Allison “Tootie” Montana’s 50 Years of Mardi Gras Indian Suiting. The author references Art Historian Ute Stebich’s description of the long-standing tradition of masking as Indians in Haiti.

Stebich, writing in the Brooklyn Museum’s catalogue for the Haitian Art exhibition suggests that Mardi Gras Indians were central to Haitian celebrations. "No carnival parade is complete without a group of Indians. Indian costumes are the most magnificent of all, exemplifying the Haitians' sense of color and the work and love that goes into the detailed planning of masquerades".

(Ya Salaam: 1997)

As Big Chief Bo Dollis wore the crown in bringing the musical aspects of the tradition forward, Montana was a true maverick in the masking aspect of Black Indian culture, utilizing three dimensional elements and Haitian sequin and bead materials in his Rara drapo style designs. In her 2013 article entitled, “New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians: Mediating Racial Politics from the Backstreets to Main Street,” Cynthia Becker cites the observations of Yale University Master anthropologist Robert Farris Thompson, who draws a comparison between Tootie’s Haitian/Kongo influences and the spiritual implications illuminated in his Mardi Gras Indian suits.

Robert Farris Thompson believed that the use of sequins and beads in Vodou artistry in Haiti, which influenced Rara tunics and pants, was itself the Creole manifestation of the Kongo tradition of painting small dots and dashes on their figural sculptures. Thompson asserted that these “ritual dots” mediate between the living realm of humans and the spirit world of the dead. In fact, throughout the Caribbean, men dressed as Indians decorate their bodies with dots and dashes during Carnival (Fig. 7). Therefore, Thompson’s analysis asserts that stylistic similarities between Haitian Rara other Caribbean carnival costumes may stem from a shared Kongo ancestry that later migrated to New Orleans.

(Becker 2013, 39)
In contrast to Dollis, Montana felt that the chants of the Black Indians were sacred and would not perform the music at New Orleans’ various festivals or on commercial recordings. In an interview with current *Yellow Pocahontas* Big Chief Shaka Zulu, conducted by Becker, Zulu describes Montana’s philosophy and approach:

>You are chanting and when you chant, you are conjuring up old spirits. The syncopation and the repetition … you keep doing it over and over. It’s almost like a ring shout. You do it over and over and over and over. You start to get tired and all of a sudden, you start to bring up all these different spirits and you start feeling certain things. So you are conjuring up all these old chiefs who had to go through getting beat in the head with sticks and all this stuff just to be able to mask. That’s why Tootie did not want to put music on the stage. He says it becomes something else.

*(Ibid,44)*

Some strongly believe that his death exactly two months prior to Hurricane Katrina was a spiritual signal, a cultural “wake-up call” for the City of New Orleans. Even after his passing, Montana’s strong resolve to both establish a paradigm for and preserve the integrity of the Black Indian tradition carries on through the members of his tribe.
African Inspired Masking

Big Chief Victor Harris of the Mardi Gras Indian tribe “Spirit of the Fi Yi Yi” describes the "trance-like state" that comes over him after he dons his Mardi Gras Chief suit on Mardi Gras morning. Again, much like the wearers of the Egungun masquerade in Nigeria, who embody and "become" spirits of ancestors, the Mardi Gras Indians also embody and "become" the warrior ancestor spirits on the streets of New Orleans. (Harris 2013).

Harris’ tribe is known for the more literal African design elements and materials employed in the construction of his tribal suits. Most of the mask designs cover the entire face, and the designs will feature grass, African cowrie shells, and beaded patches reminiscent of Yoruba beadwork. In the days and hours before heading out for Mardi Gras, Big Chief Harris states that he will pray alone to prepare for the day of spiritual healing that sends him into a trance-like state behind his mask. (Ibid).

In an interview with Harris for the Times Picayune newspaper conducted to preview Mardi Gras season, entitled “Mardi Gras Indian Chief Victor Harris of Fi-Yi-Yi prepares for a day of blessing and healing,” Harris emphasizes the spiritual aspects of his masking discipline.

The suit speaks for itself. I don’t speak. That suit is Fi-Yi-Yi and I’m the spirit of Fi-Yi-Yi, so I bring this to life. I work within the spirit. I move and I groove with the spirit. Walking around all day with all of that weight, 200 pounds, dancing and singing, hooting and hollering, I mean I couldn’t just carry that alone. (Ibid)

Harris goes on to explain:

Its hours and hours just to do something like a little small piece. We’re actually compelled to do this. This is a spiritual suit. Honestly it is. It belongs to the culture and I’m representing the culture. It’s vested in me to present this. I’m just the speaker of the suit, like a messenger, a carrier, and so I was given the name the Spirit of Fi-Yi-Yi. It was a name that just came from God. Chief of the Mandingo Warriors. We are all warriors. (Ibid)
Harris’ eloquent and inspired description of his experience masking as an Indian suggests that there is a depth to the tradition that goes beyond the suit, the music and the mask itself. A spiritual element that underlies the creation and performance of the masquerade is suggested, but is not fully described here.

In searching for comparative African examples, some of Big Chief Harris’ regalia is reminiscent of Nigerian egungun masquerade, as well as the Mande Wasulu masquerade in Mali, West Africa. In Lucy Duran’s article “Birds of Wasulu: Freedom of Expression and Expressions of Freedom in the Popular Music of Southern Mali,” the author describes the rich masquerade and music traditions called sogoninkun, which feature unique rhythms and singing styles (sogoninkun-foly). Sogoninkun (“the little antelope head”) is the most prevalent masquerade of
the Wasulunke and the southern Bamana, originating in Wasulu. In Mande traditions from the wassoulou region, birds are a powerful metaphor “symbols of wisdom, the human spirit, and all forms of singing.” (Duran, 109)

Wassoulou music, masquerade and cultural identity, underscored with messages of freedom, are incredibly similar to the recurrent themes found in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition, as well as Native American traditions, where birds possess mystical powers and gifts of sight, “to see in daylight, and darkness” (ibid). Any Native American or African person who is considered the one who has the gift of sight, the one who has ability to carry messages from the Great Spirit or Supreme Being to the people, is venerated and held in high regard.

These “konow” or birds are also storytellers. In the Black Indian tradition, when the highly plumed “wings” and headdress-adorned Chiefs meet each other in the streets of New Orleans, they tell each other stories, often praising themselves or the members of their tribes and challenging the strength and style of tribal groups they meet on the street.

The sogoninkun masquerade closely resembles the Black Indian masquerade both visually and contextually. The ankle rattles worn by the dancers in sogoninkun are similar to the rattles on the portable tambourines of their Black Indian brothers and the style of mask is very similar to that worn by Harris. Duran cites that the lyrics of sogoninkun often “refer to the prowess of certain animals and also to great heroes of the past” (Duran, 114) which is also quite similar to Harris and many Black Indians, who sing songs about past tribal chiefs, songs about power roles within the tribe, or venerating ancestors through songs such as “Indian Red”.

28
“Won’t Bow Down, Don’t Know How”: Icons of Resistance

Resistance has been an underlying, yet ubiquitous pulse in the tradition since the 1700’s, as maroon slaves ran to temporary freedom in carefully hidden camps along the Louisiana bayous. Echoes of the historic battles waged by Africans and Indians against colonizers and oppressors ironically have manifested through the years in contemporary tribal street wars between the tribes on Mardi Gras and St. Joseph’s night, where blood shed by the axe or gun was not uncommon prior to the 1950’s. The lyrics of the Black Indian anthem “Somebody Got to Sew, Sew, Sew,” illustrates the fervency of the creative process of crafting narrative bead patches, which often-times project stories of upheaval or resistance.

**Up early that morning on Mardi Gras Day.**
*Oh Flag boy holler: Get the hell out the way!*
*Oh the Big Chief holler: Get the hell out the way!*
*Oh, I sew, I gotta sew, all day and I sew all night.*
*Oh, Chief de White Eagles done shot by!*
*Oh, if you won’t bow down, get the hell out the way!*
*It’s a beautiful Indian, hell I know!*  
*Oh, if you won’t bow down, get the hell out the road.*

As Becker asserts in her assessment of the more violent aspects of the tradition:

> The battle cry of the Indians to “sew, sew, sew,” originated as a demand for power that encouraged personal self-esteem and group consciousness. African American men dominated and controlled Mardi Gras Indians public performances, constructing an elaborate patriarchal hierarchy that recreated the image, both real and imagined, of heroic Native American warriors actively resisting domination. Violence between rival Indian tribes can be seen as displaced aggression towards the white majority that reenacted the violence associated with Native American resistance.

*(Becker 2009, 40-41)*

**Juan “Saint” Maló: Epic Hero of the Maroons**

Inspired by the grand tradition of African Epic Heroes, (Charry, 42), the historic example for resistance was set by the “Patron Saint of runaway slaves,” Juan San (Saint) Maló in the 1780s. Maló, a strong, cunning and defiant slave of unidentified African origin from the d’Arensbourg Plantation on Louisiana’s German Coast, escaped and created a network of
maroon camps called Ville Gaillarde, located in an area below New Orleans, between the Mississippi River and Lake Borgne. In her book *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall offers an interpretation of the name Maló, which is rooted in the Bambara language, meaning, “shame,” and “refers to charismatic leader who defies the social order.” (Midlo Hall 1992, 212-213)

Saint Maló created an elaborate network of camps, where he harbored as many as sixty runaway slaves. In Erin Voisin’s 2008 study of this enigmatic leader entitled, “Saint Maló Remembered,” the author describes the depth of activity and influence Maló and his maroon bands held upon the region:

*In May of 1784, at the time of San Maló’s most active resistance….In the absence of Governor Miró, the acting governor in command of the military was Lieutenant Colonel Francisco Bouligny ….accepted the responsibility for dealing with the band of maroons at the insistence of the white plantation owners (Din 1980:245). He gathered forces to pursue the band through the swamps of Ville Gaillarde. At one point San Maló and his band were reported to have killed a group of Americans in Bay St. Louis who captured his men. In their fight for freedom they turned on and killed their captors….In either case this act made San Maló a reputed killer of whites and bolstered the determination of the Spanish officials in their desire to apprehend San Maló and bring order back to the colony. (Voisin 2008,25-26).*

Having established a reputation as a murderer and strong threat to the control of slaves in the region, Maló eventually met with his death in a hanging staged at the Cabildo in New Orleans on June 19, 1784. The dramatic story of his demise might be best captured in a famous poem by George Washington Cable:

**The Dirge of Saint Maló**
by George Washington Cable

*Alas! young men, come, make lament

For poor Saint Maló in distress!

They chased, they hunted him with dogs,
They fired at him with a gun,

They hauled him from the cypress swamp.

His arms they tied behind his back,

They tied his hands in front of him;

They tied him to a horse's tail,

They dragged him up into the town.

Before those grand Cabildo men

They charged that he had made a plot

To cut the throats of all the whites.

They asked him who his comrades were;

Poor Saint Maló said not a word!

The judge his sentence read to him,

And then they raised the gallows-tree.

They drew the horse—the cart moved off—

And left Saint Maló hanging there.

The sun was up an hour high

When on the Levee he was hung;

They left his body swinging there,

For carrion crows to feed upon.

However, after his death, through his storied legacy in the bayous outside of New Orleans, he transcended from a rebel, to hero, and then to spiritual figure. In the late 19th century, Marie Laveau, the venerable Queen of New Orleans voodoo traditions included “Saint Maló” in
her spiritual pantheon alongside the deities, or Loa of New Orleans’ Haitian Voodoo religious tradition. Here he was often referred to as Saint Marron or Saint Maroon.

*These names recall the deed for which Saint Maló is most famous. He was part of the pantheon of saints at whose altar the famous Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau, paid her respects. While his usefulness as an advocate for runaway slaves might not seem relevant in contemporary society, the history and transformation of Saint Maló has become an indispensable part of the African-American community of the faithful in New Orleans. During his lifetime, he was a rebel militant in colonial Louisiana. Over time, he developed into a spiritual figure that has become an integral part of African-American identity in this New Orleans religious community.*

(Voisin 2008, 1)

The demise of the venerated epic maroon hero has come to have a much deeper meaning. In New Orleans, contemporary Vodun practitioner Divine Prince Ty Emmecca and Ghanaian drummer Andrew Wiseman perform an annual Vodun ceremony to honor the spirit of the venerated Saint Maló in front of the Cabildo at Jackson Square in New Orleans, the site where he was hung to death in 1784. Ironically, every year on June 19, on the anniversary of the death of Saint Maló, Juneteenth celebrations are held to commemorate the end of slavery in the United States. (*Saint Maroon: YouTube*)
Black Indian processions are often accompanied by members of the Spiritual churches in New Orleans. Delving into the origins of the Spiritual Church, searching for a deeper connection to African cultural retention and the Black Indian tradition, research revealed that cross-cultural and spiritual influences are derived directly from the Congo with the incorporation of Congolese deities, Native American figures such as “Black Hawk,” and Catholic Saints.

*Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiaik*, or Black Sparrow Hawk, was born in 1767 at Saukenuk, the principle city of the Sauk tribe located along the Rock River in Illinois. Black Hawk was born into the Thunder Clan. He became a warrior and symbol of resistance, particularly during the
“Black Hawk War,” as he led Native American tribes in 1832 to recover lands ceded to them in the Treaty of St. Louis. (Jacobs, Kaslow 1991)

Mother Leafy Anderson, is credited for bringing Black Hawk as an icon of resistance and spirit guide to New Orleans from Chicago on the early 1900’s. When she died, Mother Catherine Seals carried on his tradition as head of the Spiritualist Church, relating to Black Hawk as her spirit guide as well. (Ibid)

In Jason Berry’s provocative 1995 book, “Spirit of Black Hawk: A Mystery of Africans and Indians,” the authors paints a vivid picture of the syncretic blending of African spirituality with Native American resistance, combined with a good measure of Pentecostalism and medium-driven spirit possession. The author describes the complex environment of the Spiritualist Church, as a place where the spirit realm and human landscape collide:

Against this background, the Black Hawk chant has powerful resonance. In the one I have heard, set to rocking purr on the organ and the clash of palms and knuckles on tambourines, the faithful sing: ‘He’ll fight your battles….he’s on the wall….he’s on the wall.’ While there is no evidence linking Black Hawk to St. Peter-Papa Legba to Leafy Anderson’s designs, the Indian holds a comparable role as a prototype of cultural memory, a guardian ‘on the wall’ between the church of the living and the world of the spirits.

(Berry 1995, 99)

Again, by traveling back to the source of this retention in New Orleans’ Congo Square, the explanation for the spiritual connection between West Africa and the City of New Orleans was clearly that both were Catholic colonies. Catholicism’s acceptance of syncretism, ushering in a litany of saints and spirits, was a significant factor in the religion’s adaptability to easily incorporate African spirituality and cosmology into the culture.
Bruce Raeburn, curator for the *Hogan Jazz Archive* at Tulane University, characterizes this syncretic connection in a profile on Congo Square in the *African American Registry*:

*There is a greater ease that is made possible between African religions and Catholicism. The iconography of the Catholic faith is not stark, but rather, it’s loud and in its own way colorful. It lends itself to the kinds of additions that we find in African spirituality.*

*(Raeburn,AAR)*
In a groundbreaking article “Indian Altars of the Spiritual Church: Kongo Echoes in New Orleans,” author Stephen C. Wehmeyer cites the complexity of the church and the plethora of influences that are included in the make-up of altars and overall worship practices.

Prior scholarship on the Spiritual Church shows us that this work has already begun in earnest. Scholars like Claude Jacobs (1989) and Andrew Kaslow (Jacobs & Kaslow 1991), Jason Berry (1995), and photo-ethnographers Syndey Bird and Michael P. Smith (1992) have offered examinations of Indian traditions in the Spiritual Church, which highlight connections with Roman Catholic aesthetics, Mardi Gras Indian customs, and events in the life of the historical Black Hawk. There is another point of connection which I feel has not yet sufficiently been explored: the similarities with the nkisi traditions (pl. minkisi) associated with Kongo culture in central Africa and the diaspora.

(Wehmeyer 1989, 63)

The relationship between Congo themes and diasporic "Indian" imagery and ritual has been touched on by several scholars, perhaps most notably Robert Farris Thompson, who describes a "Feathered Idiom of Transcendence" which correlates "Indian" traditions throughout the Black Atlantic to central African roots.

The feathered headdresses of the Amerinds, real or imagined, were decisively attractive to eyes primed by the feathered bonnets of Kongo minkisi and banganga. In Umbanda [African spiritualist practice in Brazil], the caboclo element opened the door for a flood of renascent Kongo/Angola elements, including names in KiKongo, gunpowder art, earth blazons, nganga-like headdresses recoded Amerind, and so forth.

(Thompson 1993, 190)

**Spiritualist Church & Ritual**

The New Orleans Spiritual Church’s utilization of idol worship is similar to the *Kongo Nkisi* and *Yoruba Eshu* (trickster, Nigeria), as well as idols of historic Sauk Indian Warrior, Black Hawk. Primarily located in Black communities in New Orleans, Spiritualist churches are a syncretic institution. The altar in a Spiritual Church is a place where many social, cultural and religious influences converge, including Saints from both the Catholic Church (i.e. Black Hawk and St. Michael are syncretized), civil rights icon *Martin Luther King Jr.*, African
diasporic influences and Native American folklore. Many Native American Spiritualists/Hoodoo conjurers such as Reverend Goat and the late Coco Robicheaux were followers of the church, as well as regular supporters of Black Indian Chiefs. Reverend Goat (of Cherokee origin) attempted to bring together members of several Native American tribes together with Tootie Montana and other Black Indian tribes to formally celebrate their brotherhood in a controversial peace-pipe ceremony in Congo Square in 1994. (Williams, 2002).

In *The Eyes of Understanding*, Wyatt MacGaffey writes of the prominence and power of such idols as Nkisi, “Nkisi-of-the-above are associated with the atmosphere, used for protection or supernatural attack, for law giving, oath taking, and administering divine punishment”. (Wehmeyer 1989,63).

Spiritualist church bishops might offer Nkisi and Black Hawk rum or gin (Yoruba/Kongo) “firewater” as an offering to activate his favor. This term is also often referenced in Mardi Gras Indian narratives and songs such as “Big Chief Like Plenty of Firewater” by the Wild Magnolias (Wehmeyer 1989, 65).

A similar practice of offering “Oti” or clear rum or gin is found when “opening up the path” for successful spiritual work with Eshu in Yoruba rooted religions, or with Papa Legba in Vodun. Many of the male deities such as Ochosi, (depicted as an Indian warrior), Sango (god of thunder, lightning and the drum), and Ogun (god of iron and war) are offered rum or gin during spiritual work or venerations as well. Similar to the “bucket behind the door” used to house Black Hawk and his spiritual implements and offerings, Ogun is usually housed in an iron cauldron with his implements and offerings. (Williams: 2009-2017),
**St. Joseph’s Day**

In addition to making their annual debut at Mardi Gras, Black Indians also participate in large festivities and “Super Sunday” processions for St. Joseph’s Day. In the Houston Institute of Culture’s “Louisiana Project,” researcher Anna Maria Chupa offers her findings on St. Joseph altars, cultivated while she conducted research on Spiritualism and Vodun in New Orleans.

In my search for more information on Damballah, an African spirit who came to be associated with St. Patrick and with Moses in the syncretized Vodun of new world contexts, I also saw frequent references to St. Joseph. Spiritualist churches who honored Black Hawk as a patron spirit of social justice simultaneously honored St. Joseph and Moses in prominent positions on their altars. (Chupa, 1997, Houston).

Chupa’s research further associates “Black Hawk” and the Spiritualist Church traditions in New Orleans to Vodun and syncretic uses of Catholic Saints. While Black Indians rarely discuss any direct connection between the Spiritualist church, Black Hawk, African spirituality and their masquerade traditions, a song penned by Dr. John and Bo Dollis for the Wild Magnolias release of “Life is a Carnival,” speaks clearly of Black Hawk as an “Indian Saint,” referencing St. Joseph’s Day as well:

**Blackhawk Lyrics- Wild Magnolias/Dr. John**
(lyrics transcribed by R. Williams)

Blackhawk A Chief... an Indian Saint
Blackhawk Told the Indians to Celebrate
Blackhawk I said a Chief... an Indian Saint
Blackhawk Told the Indians to Celebrate
Blackhawk Lawd, he came down to New Orleans
Blackhawk He told the Indians to do their thing
Blackhawk He made the Wildman heal the sick
Blackhawk He sure made the dumb talk
Blackhawk Givin’ eyesight to the blind
Blackhawk He made a cripple surely walk
Blackhawk Well I’m talkin ‘bout an Indian Saint
Blackhawk Told the Indians to Celebrate

*Big Chiefs Bo Dollis Jr. and Sr., Tipitina’s New Orleans, 2010, photo credit: Robin Williams©2010*
Blackhawk  Well I’m talking about an Indian Saint
Blackhawk  He came back St. Joseph’s Day
Blackhawk  He lit a big hot fiyo
Blackhawk  He never get tiyo
Blackhawk  He came back around the Mardi Gras
Blackhawk  Went to Indian Practice in a Ancient Hall
Blackhawk  Told the Indians exactly what he saw
Blackhawk  And now that’s what I came for
Blackhawk  Yeah, see what the Indians say
Blackhawk  He told the Indians wear the feathers and paint
Blackhawk  Oh yes he was an Indian Saint
Blackhawk  Told the Indians to celebrate
Blackhawk  Well we down in New Orleans
Blackhawk  Told them how to do they thing
Blackhawk  Came around and healed the sick
Blackhawk  Sure made the dumb to talk
Blackhawk  He gave eyesight to the blind
Blackhawk  Made a cripple surely walk
Blackhawk  Yeah he was the Indian Saint
Blackhawk  He give the Indians their hooch
Blackhawk  Every year they make a brand new suit

The lyrics to Black Hawk speak of an intimate relationship with the “Indian Saint” who tells the Mardi Gras Indians “how to do they thing.” The lyrics also pay deference to the healing powers of Black Hawk within the context of the Spiritual Church. Berry describes the extension of ritual elements of the Mardi Gras Indian practices and shows their narrative chants have invaded their collective consciousness, communicated through the tradition in “Spirit of Black Hawk”:

More than mere celebration, the Mardi Gras Indians enacted a symbolic drama of the ritual psyche, an interpretation of the dreams of a common language....The Mardi Gras Indian chants and tambourine rhythms were not a form a spirit worship per se; but through a slowly building body of verbal riffs and coded chants, they launched an oral history, praising the Big Chiefs who lead the tribes, singing the equivalent of prayers like
“Indian Red,” and laying down a body of lore, that by the 1970’s that was shooting streams of chant-driven lyrics into pop music recordings....

(Berry 1995: 105-06)

It is without substantial evidence or conjecture from culture bearers that the author posits that the chants of the Black Indians are not a “form of spirit worship”. The rich and complex relationships between the Spiritual Church, African and Native American influences and the practices of the Black Indian tradition and ritual is a provocative area of research which has not been fully explored.

While the photo-ethnography of Michael P.Smith in his 1984 book “Spirit World” paints correlative pictures of the visual and visceral elements which address matters of resistance, spirituality and identity inculcated with ritual practice, no clear explanation is given as to how the expressive various folk and spiritual cultures of New Orleans are truly intertwined. The Wild Magnolias’ song Black Hawk offers a key to the kingdom in this regard, and sheds a spotlight on this unique connection worthy of further investigation.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

THESIS

This project aims to build a compelling bridge from prior ethnographic research to offer tangible, correlative evidence to the origins of the art form. Not many researchers have been able to conclusively tell the story of the origins and evolution of the Black Indians, which this project proposes to address.

Descriptions of Research Tools

To analyze research conducted by ethnographers over the last fifty years, this project has utilized a Literature Survey Talley Matrix model. For field research activities, interviews, archival video, and phenomenological research, a similar model was employed to collect and organize data to support the key concepts to be proven in this project.

Participants in the Study/Research Support

Fortunately, this project has garnered the support from several key participants in New Orleans. With regard to field research regarding Nigeria’s Egungun Masquerade and its connection to the masking traditions of Black Indians in New Orleans, the original intention for research activities in 2016 was to travel to Senegal and Nigeria, to utilize audio-visual and ethnographic interview methods, and to collect cultural artifacts and tangible examples which demonstrate the contextual thread that binds together the traditions. The travel was unfortunately postponed. Undaunted, other resources were pursued to gather research. Nigerian Egungun examples were collected at Oyotunji African Village in Sheldon, South Carolina, including several filmed segments of a public Egungun Procession.
With regard to field research on music in Senegal, and its connection to the musical traditions of Black Indians in New Orleans, Dr. Ibrahima Seck agreed to discuss his foundational research, as he is now full time Director of Research with the Whitney Plantation Museum in Wallace, Louisiana. Through a comprehensive interview with Dr. Seck, as well as other musicians and academicians, further insights came with regard to the African cultural and spiritual retentions that exist between New Orleans and West Africa.

In 2011, ethnomusicologist Bernard Woma aided in the identification and comparison of Ghanaian linguistic characteristics to Black Indian chants. Additionally, West African musicians and researchers, including Andrew Wiseman, an Ewe drummer and ceremonial Vodun practitioner from Ghana, who performs regularly with the Guardians of the Flame Mardi Gras Indians, offered valuable information about the connections between his culture and the Black Indians.

In New Orleans, several Black Indian Chiefs and tribal members, curators and scholars agreed to conduct interviews, after the Liberty University Institutional Review Board application for research activities was approved. These interviews completed research activities for the final outcomes of this project.

**Academic Research Timeline**

This project reflects over two decades spent working with musicians from the African Diaspora, Jazz musicians as well as the Black Indians in New Orleans. This research is dedicated to the memory of Big Chief Theodore Emile “Bo” Dollis of the widely venerated Mardi Gras Indian band The Wild Magnolias. Big Chief Bo’s cursory knowledge of his own cultural tradition created a desire to understand the story of “Black Indians,” African American and Creole working class men in New Orleans, who fashion intricate works of art in beaded suits
and sing songs and chants in a cryptic language. In 1997 after a performance by the *Wild Magnolias* at *House of Blues* in New Orleans, Big Chief delivered a somewhat truncated version of “the story:”

*I don’t know, really. I heard that the slaves were helped by Indians when they were trying to escape down the [Mississippi] river or up the bayous to be free. A lot of the slaves married into the Indian tribes, and here we are today, thanking them for what they did.* (Bo Dollis, 1997)

In 2002, historical research was conducted on French Colonial Louisiana, most notably the slave trade of the *Company of the Indies* in Saint Louis, Senegal. Most interesting was the provocative history of Maroon slaves who merged forces and lent strength to the Native Indians of Louisiana. The Natchez and other Native American tribes in the Gulf region adopted slaves from the Congo, Bight of Benin and Senegambia, eventually staging uprisings along the Mississippi and overturning French Forts. The result was a historic fictional adaptation, a play called “Brotherhood in Congo Square”. (Williams 2002)

The first performance of the play was in 2003 at the *Indiana History Center*. The *West African Research Center* in Dakar, Senegal, invited the cast to present the work at the “Bouki Blues Festival” in 2003. Unfortunately, they could not obtain visas for the cast and subsequently did not make the trip. From 2008 through 2011 in New Orleans, I further explored the tradition by conducting personal interviews with Chiefs as well as pursuing ethnographic study and audio/visual archiving of Mardi Gras Indian tribes. In 2011, portions of the text from “Brotherhood in Congo Square” were employed in a performance that was co-produced with German musician and impresario Thomas Gerdiken, with New Orleans trombonist Delfeayo Marsalis, as well as a host of African, Cuban, New Orleans, and German musicians. The debut of the narrative was premiered at “African Roots of Congo Square,” in 2011 in Berlin, Germany.
German audiences were very receptive to the story as a cultural foundation for the roots of New Orleans music and the art form of Jazz.

In 2014-15, I initiated my Master of Arts program in Ethnomusicology, concentrating a majority of my research activities and study on African cultural retention. In the spring of 2015, I conducted an academic survey of several authors’ books, journal articles, and media about the origins of Black Indians, which I utilized in creating a preliminary Literature review for my thesis. Additionally, I gathered more print resources during fieldwork in New Orleans in 2016.

With the preparatory course Research Methods in Ethnomusicology (ETHM 650), I received certification from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research in “Protecting Human Research Participants.” In addition, I submitted my project for review and garnered final approval by Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).
PROJECT

Overview of the Project Design

Conducting fieldwork was necessary to collect essential comparative data to complete this project. This culminating work celebrated the link between my own Miami Nation heritage and African cultural retentions. As both a person of Native American heritage, and a formal initiate of the Yoruba IFA religion as Egbe Osun, I possess an insider perspective on Native American spiritual practices as well as the Yoruba and Dahomey threads that bind together the traditions from Africa, throughout the Diaspora.

In Designing & Conducting Ethnographic Research, Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul describe vastly different approaches in the ethnographic process. They cite that some researchers pose a "very clear, theoretically driven model and use the ethnographic study to confirm, clarify, or disconfirm the existence of items, domains, or patterns" (LeCompte & Schensul 2010, 198).

This thesis project on the origins of the Black Indians is based on this particular approach. With a strong conviction and many years of prior observation, the project was driven forward with new research to prove that theories of African cultural retention maintained in the tradition were indeed true. This project employed a mixed methods research model to demonstrate and confirm the validity of its claims, that the patterns of music, masking, and adornment of the Black Indians are rooted within African cultural traditions and language.

Relationship of Past Research to Current Literature to the Project Design

As a foundation for this thesis, research was initially conducted through the historical and cultural archives of Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans. A
most notable discovery was the wealth of qualitative and quantitative research conducted of Dr. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. Hall’s use of mixed method research regarding the geographic and demographic breakdown of African slaves imported to Louisiana, as well as the evolution of the creolization of Africans is both remarkable and distinct.

In her groundbreaking work entitled *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, the author provides detailed history of the role of Africans in the making of colonial Louisiana, down to the origination of slave ships and the names of slaves themselves. She has developed an on-line database for researchers and genealogists interested in tracing heritage and history to African origin. (Hall, 1992)

In this graph, Hall demonstrates the demographic composition of Africans in Louisiana. In Orleans Parish, where the Mardi Gras Indian tradition was developed, a majority of Africans were of Central African (Congo) Bight of Benin (Yoruba) and
Senegambian heritage. I also utilized Hall’s important historical survey work in 2002, as I researched the history of French Colonial Louisiana, most notably the slave trade of the *Company of the Indies* in Saint Louis, Senegal. The Company of the Indies played a major role in exporting slaves from the Congo, Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, and Senegal to the Port of New Orleans in the early 1700s. (ibid)

**Project Plan to Completion**

The comparative ethnographic data that was needed to complete the research for this project was initiated in the spring of 2016 with studies of the spiritual, ritual, masking, musical, and linguistic characteristics in New Orleans and at the *Oyuntunji African Village* in Gullah Country. Phenomenologically charged research activities based on the lived experiences and performances of the participants in the masking rituals was key to the success of this project. Multi-media documentation of the spiritual aspects of each masking tradition played a key role in establishing cross-cultural comparisons, demonstrating that African cultural retentions are strong and viable in the Black Indian culture in New Orleans.

Through observations of this tradition, as well as the music and masquerade rituals found in West Africa and its diaspora, research on the Egungun Masquerade in Nigeria has been utilized as one root comparison and basis for the origins of the Black Indian masking tradition. To gain first-hand insight and collect data on this root tradition, further research was conducted on Nigerian Egungun and other comparative African masquerade traditions as well as comparative spiritual/ritual traditions in the fieldwork.

**Project Implementation**

After IRB approval was garnered through Liberty University in February 2016, initial research activities required that several trips were taken to gather ethnographic media samples and conduct interviews. Two thirds of the phenomenological research
documentation was generated in public demonstrations of the traditions, the first of which was conducted in Gullah “Low Country” at the site of Yoruba African compound at Oyotunji Village in Sheldon, South Carolina. There, several segments of a Yoruba Egungun Masquerade ritual were filmed.

A few weeks later, I seized an opportunity to interview the oldest living Mardi Gras Indian “Flag Boy” Ike Edwards in New Orleans. Two more research trips were conducted, which included opportunities to film Black Indian Processions at “St. Joseph’s Night” and the Uptown and Westbank “Super Sunday” events. During this time, I filmed several interviews with tribal Chiefs and members, curators, historians and spiritualists throughout New Orleans, as well as conducted a tour and interview at the Whitney Plantation in Wallace, Louisiana and a survey of the sacred Emerald (Indian) Mound in Natchez, Mississippi. Research activities concluded in May 2016.

**Research Methods and Tools**

Based on past ethnographic work, as well as the qualitative, phenomenological research I had the opportunity to undertake, I employed several key data collection methods to substantiate my theories. A majority of the study conducted thus far is based on ethnographic interviews with Black Indian Chiefs and other tribal members, focusing upon their personal histories and cultural belief systems. These interviews have been augmented by prior research and content analysis of secondary, archival, textual, or visual data, gathered since 2002.

**Data Collection**

In New Orleans, I have largely utilized a phenomenological approach to the “lived experience” of masking traditions, documenting audio-visual and ethnographic interviews with subjects to complete my research. I have also collected cultural artifacts and tangible
examples, which demonstrate the contextual thread that binds together the traditions.
Specifically, I have collected musical samples, which demonstrate rhythmic links between
the cultures, audio documentation of personal interviews with Black Indians, videos of each
culture’s processions, and artifacts from the regalia of each tradition.

Big Chief “Black Feather” Lionel Delpit at Uptown Super Sunday 2009. photo credit: Robin Williams ©2009..
CHAPTER IV: IN THE FIELD

EGUNGUN MASQUERADE- OYOTUNJI VILLAGE
DESTINATION: Sheldon, South Carolina
Public Tour and Egungun Ceremony honoring the late Oba of Oyotunji African Village

It is a five-hour journey by car from Atlanta to Sheldon, South Carolina, located near Beaufort and the Atlantic Ocean shoreline. Adekoya Adefunmi, the younger brother of the current King of the village, Oba Adejuyigbe Adefunmi II, arranged for access to the compound. Entering the village is a truly unique experience in the American continent, as it appears just like a Yoruba African village. There are large statues, Orisha shrines, hand built housing and community gathering structures, and all the people in the village are dressed in African clothing. Elders greet outside travelers at the front of the village, guiding visitors to the main community area. Several young men who were there with a seasoned guest, a Geechee Gullah musician who had visited many times. He filled in visitors about information on the village and on the Geechie Gullah heritage of the area. There, visitors wait for the public tour and the subsequent Egungun Masquerade celebration and procession.

A woman from Osogbo, Nigeria was selling clothes, including adire (special tie-dye technique only found in Osogbo) dresses and various spiritual items. The tour commenced with several people in attendance. When arriving in the Osun Shrine, the guide asked me to speak about my spiritual paths as an initiate. This was an honor for me, and I felt more engaged in the environment. Several African-American women were very intrigued by this presentation and one woman asked why some Europeans practiced an African Religion. Thankfully, the focus quickly shifted to the emergence of several Nigerian Bata drummers coming out of one of the home structures, playing music in preparation for the Egungun Masquerade. The musicians are full time residents of Oyotunji Village. The guide said that
only twenty-five people live at the compound now, but at one time, there were as many as three-hundred people living full time in the Village.

The Egungun Mask emerged from the building after the drummers played for some time. The Egungun was dressed in a luminous masquerade adorned by several elaborately sequined panels, similar to Haitian Rara or beaded flags and “Downtown” style Mardi Gras Indian suits. There were several segments of the Egungun’s dance, which included the Egungun greeting all the shrines for Orishas and Ancestors, then greeting the young Oba. This ceremony was to commemorate the death of his Father H.R.H. Adefunmi I, who was the first man to be initiated into IFA religion in America. In the early 1970’s he established Oyotunji, to promote African philosophy, way of life and spirituality. The outcomes of the journey to Oyotunji Village were successful in capturing the essence and literal African cultural retentions of the Egungun Masquerade in America.
In 2002, Ibrahima Seck was working with the West African Research Center in Dakar, Senegal. He read the play “Brotherhood in Congo Square” and was so impressed that he sent an invitation for the play to be performed in Dakar. Unfortunately, without visas for the entire cast, performing the play in Dakar was impossible. Fourteen years later, Seck agreed to discuss the evolution of this thesis project, contributing his personal reflections toward the pursuit of the spiritual and cultural retentions of West Africa in the Mardi Gras.
Indian tradition. The trip to the plantation was long and the overall experience and energy of the grounds was emotionally draining and profound in ways that words cannot fully express.

On arrival, there was an intense thunderstorm at the Whitney Plantation. Seck conducted a talk for several of the guests on the African/Native American origins documented of the slaves who lived on the plantation (attributed to the research of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall), then gave me a private tour of the “Big House”, slave quarters and the grounds until 5:30 PM. The entire experience was around six hours long.

The Whitney has been opened to the public for one year, and during that period, there have been over 36,000 visitors to the Museum, which serves as the only dedicated venue to the culture and history of slavery in North America. Ibrahima and I spent a great deal of time touring the grounds on a golf cart, walking through the structures and talking about the spiritual nature of his experiences at the plantation. Throughout the tour on the grounds, a distinct feeling, a palatable memory of brutality and loss seemed to be looming under the umbrella of the moss-laden trees.

During the interview, Seck spoke of the lack of study and resources with regard to the Black Indian tradition:

*I think the first problem is that for a very long time there were no serious studies linking Louisiana to Africa, looking at the demographics of the African people and linking them directly to their people in Louisiana. If you find these people of African origin performing, making music, or masking I think the first thing to do is to look at where they came from. There are no strong studies trying to link the Mardi Gras Indian tradition to Africa. They have done so for the Blues, linking the music to Africa, but not for the Mardi Gras Indians.*

*(Williams/Seck Interview: 2016)*

He explained that there were 6,000 slaves that were brought during the “French Period,” a time when the *Company of the Indies* was actively exporting slaves from St. Louis and Goree Island in Senegal. He added that the African retentions brought by slaves are
found throughout West Africa, and orisha or spiritual veneration is the same across West Africa, just named differently.

The tools they may use for worship may be different, and worship is conducted in different languages. The Fon, the Wolof all use different names, but it means the same thing. It is not really worshipping the spirits, they use them to solve their problems. Africans have a really pragmatic relationship with religion. They use them to solve their problems on earth, at the same time believing in one God, who is above everything.

If you go to a shrine in Africa, (I am speaking from my own experience) they will call the name of their orishas or traditional spirits, as well as someone like Mohammed or even Jesus. People learn and will pick and choose from whatever they learn and pick from the local environments. It goes through transformations but the principles are always the same. (Ibid)

Seck discussed the common threads and the manifestation of the deities and ancestral spirits through the suits of the Black Indians. He spoke of the African elements, cowrie shells, beads and masking the face (almost completely covered) in contemporary suits. He stated that the connection still exists, even though the Indians cannot speak on it directly.

Thanks to the work of Victor Harris there is a shift, they are using the cowrie shells and their faces are covered. Maybe over time there is some kind of evolution, you lose something along the way. You lose the memory of Africa, but you keep performing it, although they were deported to the New World to become slaves, and they escaped to become maroons. Like when you grow up in Africa in a traditional setting, you go through initiation. (Ibid)

Seck agreed with the theory that a similar sense of duty to urban neighborhood plays out on the streets in the “theater” of the Indian processions on Mardi Gras morning, with the Indians demonstrating their unique group (tribal) identity, cultural resistance, as well as their communal and spiritual roles as protectors of their individual neighborhoods:

Although these people were deported as slaves, many became maroons, runaway slaves. All African male societies have masks to protect the group as a guardian, it is a symbol of unity and everyone has to respect it. Once they got over here, I think that tradition was kept alive among the maroons. There are certain things that you cannot do on plantations. I think that is how it survived. They take things from their new
environment. They have been dealing with Native Americans this whole time, who were also enslaved on the plantation. They married them, they had children together. They also took things from Christianity or Islam. (Ibid)

With regard to African cultural retentions found in the music, Seck mainly compared the rhythm of the music with typical rhythms found in Senegal among the Wolof. “I found that beat when I travelled to Benin and Nigeria. I went to Ouidah in Benin and heard the same beat played for the Vodu dancers.” (Ibid) Seck spoke of the cultural convergence that occurred with slavery in Louisiana:

Once the slaves were brought over here in the context of slavery, even though they may speak different languages or be from different tribes it was easy for them to connect with each other, especially in terms of the religion, the music, and the drumming…. it is very obvious. Same principles. I travelled extensively in West Africa, from Senegal to Nigeria, and I see so many similarities. (Ibid)

Similar foundations exist in other parts of the Diaspora, in Cuba, for example, where the clave rhythm can owe its origins to roots in Nigeria and Benin. The rhythms found in New Orleans music are indicative of this synthesis of cultural convergence. For instance, clave (Spanish term denoting “key”), which is essentially based on varied syncopated figures within a 6/8 rhythmic configuration, is based on Wolof and Yoruba musical foundations. As the rhythm travelled with the Bata drum to Cuba, it evolved, becoming a major force in both African religious retentions and later in the secular music of rhumba and salsa. (YouTube: Marsalis)

While many believe that the rhumba clave, or “cinquillo” rhythm travelled to New Orleans through Cuba, Seck’s observations suggest that the roots of Black Indian rhythms, the music and the masquerade were essentially and directly derived from African influence on the plantations and at the grounds of Congo Square in New Orleans.
Passionately playing the drums at his spiritual shrine, Andrew Wiseman graciously agreed to share his perspective on the connections between his culture and the culture of New Orleans. “I see New Orleans as a citadel of culture--the Blues, the music and the food,” he said.

Wiseman is a Ghanaian-born Ewe Vodun Ceremonial Drummer for the Guardians of the Flame Mardi Gras Indians. He was very informative and spoke extensively of the
African cultural features and retentions found in Mardi Gras Indian music from Ghana, Benin and Nigeria.

Africa is still divided between ethnic and tribal lines. In the Ewe people, through our drumbeats and our way of life, I see a really strong link between my people and the people of New Orleans. You can take people out of Africa, but you cannot take Africa out of the people. It is imbued...it is in the genes. Slavery has done more harm than good because we have been indoctrinated. However, now we cannot run away or shun the influence, because it is so real.

The rhythm is improvised and infused with a whole lot of our musical influences. The orchestration of the cowbell, the dundun, the cowbell, a lot of rhythms can be infused with Ghana, especially with the Ewe people. The chants. "Ago Ago Ame" sounds like "Iko Iko Ade". The inflection of the chant/call to the tribe, which is shouted "Indians" is similar to calls in my Ewe culture...the feeling and energy of it is the same.

(Williams/Wiseman Interview: 2016)

He also spoke about the connection of Vodun worship and Black Indian culture.

Mardi Gras Indian music as a whole, when I listen to the beat, the energy of it, I see a link between my people's music and this music. Vodun is my culture, it is Ewe culture and my language. The Mardi Gras Indians, African music and Vodun music are an infusion, it is all interwoven and interconnected.

Ewe calls IFA culture of Nigeria AFA. The same way as in Vodun, or when you see the Tibetan Monks coming together to make mandala, the Ewe bring Ama leaves together, different herbs, they sit together and chant and invoke energy, just the same that the Chiefs come together and spend time sewing, bead after bead. It is all the power of human energy. Your soul is in it, so when you wear it the energy comes to you. (Ibid)

Wiseman described the use of beads in maintaining African cultural and spiritual context through constructing Black Indian masquerade, as well as the visual and visceral effects of the wearing of the masquerade in ritual tradition:

The beadwork is also the same. We didn't have gold or diamonds. Even our Queens and Kings wear beads. The Yoruba and the Ewe all use beads, in vibrant colors. In the processions in Africa, we sing the Kings praises, just like we do for the Big Chief in the Mardi Gras Indians. Depending on the occasion, for the Kings, the Queens or a funeral procession, in Ghana we have a masquerade of Fanti people. Like the Ewes,
it is evident that the different energies and deities come and possess people. Unfortunately because of colonization, there has been of bastardizing of the culture, some people have shunned the culture. (Ibid)

Altar containing a beaded and sequined Vodou flag, offerings and red and black candles for the deity Eshu (effigy). Andrew Wiseman at New Orleans Healing Center: Photo by Robin Williams © 2016
THE ELDER SPEAK

THE SPIRITUALIST CONNECTION
DESTINATION: New Orleans, Louisiana
DATE: March 12, 2016
New Orleans Sacred Music Festival.
Interview with Bishop Oliver Coleman of the Spiritualist Church

At the 2016 New Orleans Sacred Music Festival, additional research commenced with regard to the Spiritualist Church, which has been observed over the years to hold a connection to the Mardi Gras Indian tradition, via the veneration of Sauk Indian warrior Black Hawk, the Congolese idol Nkisi and various other features in its worship and musical style. In addition to gathering more information and pictures from the archives of ethnographer Michael P. Smith, contact was made to Bishop Oliver Coleman, a long-time Spiritualist who was prominently featured in Steven Wehmeyer’s ethnographies related to the Spiritualist Church. Sallie Ann Glassman, prominent Vodun Priestess and proprietor of the New Orleans Healing Center arranged for an audience with Bishop Coleman, who was scheduled to host a shrine at the festival.

The center atrium was jam packed with various musicians, Tibetan monks creating a mandala, artists and spiritual workers with displays and various types of altars. Bishop Coleman was operating a table that had an effigy of Black Hawk, red and white candles and spiritual water in bottles placed on it. After he was officially introduced by Sallie Ann, the interview commenced.

Bishop Coleman was very happy to speak to about the Spiritualist Church, as well as its historical connections to Black Hawk. Having been involved in the Spiritualist Church since he was a teenager, he professed that he been possessed by the spirit of Black Hawk many times. Coleman explained that since his initial contact with the Indian spirit in dreams,
he has become firmly entrenched in the healing aspects of the religion, becoming a professional healer, and a reiki specialist as well.

**Connection to African Influences**

Coleman spoke about the connection of the work of the Spiritualists in maintaining a connection to Africa through the practice of traditional medicine and “root work”, which evolved over the centuries in New Orleans, even under oppressive conditions:

We have to always recognize our ancestors and those leaders who have come before us, because the way has already been made. Today in the work, we have a lot of modalities that came straight out of African or the Root work. Most workers in the
past knew what herbs and teas to mix. They just put a new term on it. “Aromatherapy” is the acceptable term, not “root work”. When you say “aromatherapy”, you are just burning some candles and using herbs. Of course, because of oppression in the past, our Ancestors and those that did the work before us were forced to go underground. (Williams Interview/Coleman 2016)

When asked if he felt that Black Hawk symbolized any Yoruba or Congo deities, he agreed that there were diasporic connections between the African pantheon in connection to the Spiritualists’ adopted icon of Native American resistance, Black Hawk:

Leafy Anderson, introduced the spirit guide called Black Hawk, who happened to be a Sauk Indian, to guide the Spiritual Church tradition. You know that we have many of the same spirit guides and the names are different. Chango (Yoruba God of Thunder and Lightning) is represented in Vodun and other practices under a different name, but it is the same spirit. It goes back all the way from the beginning. Even when you look in the Bible and begin to pay attention to what’s going on, there were always people who were “seers”…things were revealed to them. We have something that a lot people yearn for. We have to understand where it comes from and put it in the proper context. The problem is that we don’t know our stories. People need to get more educated and know their stories. Other people will take our stories, and design them and put them where they want to. That is why some of the older ministers in the tradition wouldn’t do an interview. (Ibid)

I explained to him that I recognized that it was a big risk for me to come and try to conduct the interview, as I was aware that others had been reticent about sharing details about the Spiritualist church and various root work traditions. Luckily for me, Coleman was very amenable to the interview. “I am always open to that….If it is about education and leaving a legacy”.

Black Hawk/Nkisi Kongo

With regard to comparing the Nkisi Kongo idol, Yoruba Ogun warrior pot and other protection idols (such as Exu in Brazil/Eshu in Yoruba IFA) used within Africa and the Diaspora, Coleman explained the use of “Black Hawk in the bucket” for protection in the Spiritual church, as well as in Voodoo/Hoodoo conjure:

We use a vase and put the Indian head behind the door because we want him to protect us from everything coming in and destroy everything that should not be there.
Most of the time the easiest way to make an offering is to drink water. Sometimes they used to give alcohol. We do not want to give it alcohol, the Indians didn’t like that, because the white man used that against the Indians because it caused them to be enraged. I don’t want the Spirit to be enraged, I want the spirit to be able to enlighten people. I want it to be able to really affect folks. (Ibid)

Resistance

When asked if Black Hawk and the tenets of the Spiritualist Church, historically defined by the work of confident spiritual female leaders Mother Leafy Anderson and later, Mother Catherine Seals, represented a spirit of control and resistance, Bishop Coleman asserted:

Black Hawk, or the Indian Spiritualists believed in the “Great I AM” and the Great Spirit in the Sky. It was nothing but War and Conflict. He was never a Chief, but he was a great warrior. Now here we are, African Americans, Black people carrying out our fight for equality and justice. (Ibid)

As our conversation came to a close I had a clearer understanding why there had been a natural bridge between the Spiritualist and Black Indian worlds. Coleman’s response solidified prior research which demonstrated the strength of Spiritualism as a means to reinforce African-rooted identity, while harnessing the power to control destiny and ensure one’s victory over the enemy. Themes of resistance and protection from the oppressor are prevalent both within the visual representation of St. Michael, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the veneration of Black Hawk on Spiritualist Church altars, as well as within the context of messages delivered in worship services. These concepts are very much alive today, almost one hundred years after the advent of the Spiritualist movement took wing in New Orleans churches. Black Hawk and the work of the Spiritualists may be even more relevant in the wake of growing racial unrest and continued police brutality on people of color across the country, resonating with younger followers of “Black Lives Matter” and other social justice movements in our contemporary world.
Curator and historian Ronald Lewis has successfully resurrected the House of Dance & Feathers in the Lower 9th Ward after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. In 2009, a new world opened up for Lewis, as researchers and fans of New Orleans culture became aware of him through a book published by University of New Orleans Press entitled “House of Dance & Feathers”.

On the day of the interview, a church team of carpenters from Indiana were assisting building a new addition to his museum. Everything in his collection was in disarray, yet visually bits and pieces of scattered pictures stood out in the midst of Carnival headdresses,
Mardi Gras Indian bead patches, costumes and African statues and masks, which were hung around the cluttered space.

Lewis grew up on the Coulon Plantation in Thibodaux, Louisiana, with a rich cultural basis of understanding of African Cultural retentions in plantation life. He remembers his mother shelling the rice brought in from the fields and the cooking that she did at their home, essentially influenced by African food ways.

_The cooking carries retentions here from Africa in Louisiana. I used to have relatives that would bring home rice in the hull. My mother had a bowl and would beat the hull off the rice. One day I watched National Geographic and saw Africans doing the very same thing. She also used to make fried bread. Who else made that? The Houma Indians…also made the corn mach choux. It was just a way of life. It was our connections. Grey Hawk Perkins of the Houma told me “I got many cousins that look like you.” We sure did transcend all the way to the City of New Orleans, and I’m glad they did._

(Williams-Lewis Interview 2016)

He spoke of the African cultural retentions of Gullah culture in South Carolina as well and the Afro-Caribbean influence on New Orleans:

_…the Gullahs still maintain so much of that original lifestyle, we maintain a variance of the lifestyle. I can’t say where in Louisiana where they maintain a rich African history like the Gullahs do. They do a dance in Ethiopia called “the umbrella”. A lot of this transcended. You really have to back into its origins. Where do they use the umbrella on the Second Line? Influence of some things retained itself. I deal with a lot of cultural anthropologists who say that New Orleans is the most African city in the United States._

(Ibid)

Lewis spoke about spirituality extensively. He stated, “People in New Orleans live by the spirit”. We spoke about the influence of Black Hawk and Mother Catherine Seals, the founder of the Black Hawk Church. As far as the spiritual aspects of masking, he emphasized
why some Indians, like Victor Harris, are somewhat reticent to share a lot of information about the tradition for a reason:

With this culture, the suits are priceless. They are not just going to open up their doors to outsiders. He transcended in the Mid 80’s. He was with the Yellow Pocahontas, but he had a vision. He had a vision to be more Afro-centric with his suits. I have seen some similarities watching National Geographic and seeing similar suits.

Putting that suit on empowers you. You might be one of the most mild mannered persons in the world. Once you put on that suit on you are empowered by the spirit in that suit, and you become that brave spirit. It comes from your inner spirit of what you put into to making that suit, and you just transcend. Once you are in that suit, so much attention is given to you that you can’t lock it all in. (Ibid)

He said that the Spiritualist Church and Black Hawk was a significant influence in his own personal upbringing.

It is a Catholic city but we have churches of all variations. See that picture there? That is Mother Catherine Seals and an image of Black Hawk,(pointing to a picture) she was a leader of the Spiritualist Church back in the 20’s and 30’s. My wife’s Uncle Frank Lastie Sr. was her right hand assistant. Mother Catherine Seals lived here in the Lower 9th Ward and had a compound here. Trombone Shorty was my wife’s cousin, because their grandpa was Jessie “Oop Poo pa doo Hill”. They were all musicians. They were all involved in the Spiritual Church because of their dad. That’s how I learned about Black Hawk and the spirit that he held in that church. (Ibid)

Lewis agrees that the Africans and Indians had an historical connection, and that special connection laid a foundation for the Mardi Gras Indians tradition today.

We do have a connection here in America. We were brought from our country to an unknown land. The Native Americans on this land were being pushed into slavery, and we were fighting to come out of slavery. We don’t really know our history because of what was done. We were dispersed and integrated into other tribal people. You’ve got all these tribal people meshed into one. If you just think about those Mardi Gras Indian songs, it’s a blend of various cultures and languages. Everybody has their own perspective but they have their own passion for it. (Ibid)
*Photo Credits: House of Dance and Feathers, 1. Mardi Gras Indian beaded patch
On an overcast day in the Upper 9th Ward, Herreast Harrison reminisced about her husband Big Chief Donald Harrison’s family legacy as leader of the Guardians of the Flame, as well as his strong commitment to the Community. After Hurricane Katrina, the family, assisted by Tulane University School of Architecture’s Tulane City Center project, built a museum to bolster the important cultural preservation work of the Guardians Institute. The museum is a small, modern building located adjacent from the Musicians Village, built after Katrina. There are several of Donald Harrsion Sr. and Jr.’s suits in the museum, books, photographs, paintings and beadwork displayed, mostly containing African-inspired themes.

Big Chief Harrison and his family are particularly significant, because of the level of educational and cultural outreach they continue to perpetuate in his legacy. Big Chief Harrison was a voracious reader and a purveyor of Jazz. It is no surprise that he and his Jazz musician son, saxophonist Donald Harrison, served as the model for the characters of Big Chief Lambreaux and his son in the recent HBO series “TREME”.
Herreast Harrison mostly spoke about her husband’s legacy as a Big Chief, the stories of socio-cultural context of his upbringing as a Creole man, as well as the inspiration he drew from African history in becoming a one-of-a-kind Mardi Gras Indian leader in the Community.

Because my husband was so in tune with this tradition, he basically put a lot of things that would have been very good for him in the background to do this. It was what he drew his strength from....We are living in a country where we gain visibility to perform in a manner that denoted that he was a leader, that he would have the power to maneuver, and manipulate and to live his life equal partners with anybody else of any nationality. It gave him the freedom to express himself and the strength to say, “I Won’t Bow Down”.

(Williams/H. Harrison Interview: 2016)

She spoke about her husband being invited by master historian Robert Farris Thompson to Yale University to highlight the cultural importance of the Mardi Gras Indian culture.

When he wanted to bring Donald to Yale, I was supposed to be included in the group with Cherise, her Dad, Brian and then I was going to go, but Donald decided that he wanted to take the oldest known Chief at that time, living but not masking, Robert Robbie Lee. He was the co-founder, along with Ike Edwards of the White Eagles, that had left from Creole Wild West and masking with Brother Tillman. As you heard Ike Edwards say at his solo exhibition...Brother Cornelius Tillman was getting old. They were young, and they wanted get out earlier, and he was getting out later and later. That is the reason they left Brother Tillman. Donald wanted to bring Robbie so I relinquished my spot for Robbie so he could go.

It was one of the things they talked about at Donald’s funeral....the fact that he lectured at Yale. They gave him the best accommodations, and they flew first class. Limousines were waiting for them, and they treated them like celebrities. That was all because of the efforts of Robert Farris Thompson, who has been the Master of Art History department at Yale for many many years.(Ibid)

Harrison recounted the challenges of taking care of Big Chief while he was dying.

She leased her nursery school businesses, so she could spend time with him. During this time, in between taking care of the house and his health, she started to curate recordings of him speaking on his life and times as a Mardi Gras Indian Chief, as well as his myriad philosophical musings about his love of learning, singing, Jazz and living the culture. As his
condition worsened, Big Chief was in the hospital, but still came out of the hospital to record music for the first *Guardians of the Flame* album. It was that time that he officially “passed the torch” and distinction of the role of “Big Chief” of the Guardians of the Flame to his Grandson Brian Harrison, which the young Chief recounts:

> He passed it on officially to me in a song called the “Flames Are Leaving Now”. He recorded it on “New Way Pak E Way” on the First Tribe label, Guardians of the Flames’ first album. He was in the hospital. He knew that he was dying, and he left the hospital for two hours. He came from to the studio with his hospital band still on and did the song, passed the gang to me in the song, then he went right back to the hospital and died. (Williams/Brian Harrison-Nelson Interview:2016)

Further assisted by author Al Kennedy, a book entitled, *Big Chief Harrison and the Mardi Gras Indians* was published in 2010 after the Chief’s death in tribute to his legacy.

> My husband’s book was in many college classes. I had the pleasure of walking into a classroom at Tulane and every student in that class, students from around the world, were holding a copy of his book. I was just taken aback. That was his last request to me...it was to try get his words published. (Ibid)

In the matter of African cultural retentions she believes that African memory is encoded in the DNA of the Black Indians, and that is why she believes they sew what they sew, performing the intentions of their ancestors.

> It comes from the heart, it comes from the memory. It’s the DNA that is linking them to those people that were brought here and enslaved in America. It’s linking them to that masquerade that they did in each of their villages....it’s linking them to their cultural heritages. (Ibid)

Her preservationist efforts and outreach to the young people in the Upper 9th Ward “village” is undying and never-ending. The story has far to go to truly unfold.

> It’s still a secret society. There are aspects of this culture that no one will ever know, will ever get, will ever uncover.....I am doing my best. (Ibid)
(Above/Right) Details from an African themed suit created by Big Chief Donald Harrison. (Below). Photos: Robin Williams ©2016
BIG CHIEFS, FLAG & SPY BOYS:
CHANNELING THE SPIRITS OF THE ANCESTORS

DESTINATION: New Orleans, Louisiana
DATE: February 27, 2016
EVENT: Exhibition and Celebration of Flag Boy Isaac Edwards/ Interviews with Edwards and Big Chief Brian Harrison-Nelson of the Guardians of the Flame Mardi Gras Indians


Cherice Harrison-Nelson, Big Queen of the Guardians of the flame, daughter of famed Black Indian Chief Donald Harrison Sr., and a curator/historian was in charge of the event, which was to highlight the beadwork of ninety-two year old Edwards, proposed to be the “oldest living Mardi Gras Indian.”
The room was respectably filled with various musicians, academic folks, other Chiefs, Queens and children. Several elder Chiefs and Queens in their 80’s and 90’s were also there. Edwards spoke of his first suit as Flag Boy for the White Eagles back in the 1940’s. He explained why he still sews his signature butterfly patches, 50 years after he stopped masking:

*I get a good feeling when I’m sewing for the children... I started masking when I was fifteen years old, when things were kind of tough. We would take beads from an evening gown, because we didn’t have money to buy them from the store... I saw Brother Tillman and I got to liking the music and the masking. They were so pretty. I wanted to become Indian.... When you start singing and dancing with another tribe you get that “feeling”... a feeling that you just can’t describe. (Williams/I.Edwards Interview: 2016)*

Ghanaian drummer Andrew Wiseman started a lively syncopate Bambara African drum beat and everyone started to sing, play tambourine and dance. Young Chief Brian Nelson of the Guardians of the Flame led the group in chanting and dancing. After the performance, interviews were captured with both Ike, as well as Brian afterwards to discuss his various music and film projects. Brian appeared “slain in the spirit” when he was singing, and later confirmed it. He also stated that the same phenomenon happened to him on Mardi Gras Day:

*I can’t tell you what it’s like, It’s like being in church when you catch the Holy Ghost. That’s what happened on Mardi Gras day, I blacked out, did something crazy and fell out, which is why I am walking with a cane now. That is what happens for me when I have caught the creator, especially it’s expressed when I put on my spiritual regalia. It’s not a costume but a spiritual regalia, it’s the same garb worn by a rabbi, pastor or priest when you put that suit. (Williams/Harrison Interview 2016)*
One of the Young Guardians children, who incidentally, was from Nigeria, danced in a circular fashion in her regalia at the event, much like the circular dance of the Egungun Masquerade in Benin and Nigeria. Egungun masqueraders don elaborately sequined regalia and dance in a circular fashion in lively and colorful processions, which serve to venerate the ancestors in that particular culture. Big Chief Brian, producer of the Mardi Gras Indian film, “Keeper of the Flame,” agreed that channeling ancestral energy was an integral part of the masking experience and tradition.

*It is the ancestors definitely. When I put that suit on, I transform. It’s just enhanced. The ancestors live through me...when I’m sewing my Indian suit, when I’m out doing my spiritual procession and rituals, but even when I’m talking to you. I’m living my life. The ancestors live through all of us, and they express themselves through us. It might be heightened somewhat, whether you are performing, or in church, or putting it on display somewhere. That is your gift to the World. It’s the ancestors... it’s God coming through.*

*(Ibid)*
Big Chief Cheveyo was featured in 2011 at a French Quarter Festival performance produced for the Wild Magnolias, where he was masking as the “Wild Man”. Being a formidable and jovial man, he made quite an impression in a red and white suit with a White Buffalo theme. The suit contained notable elements of Yoruba Orisha Sango as well; the double tomahawk/axe theme was woven into the beadwork and Sango’s colors (red/white) were prominent. My particular memory and observation surfaced in the introduction of his interview, setting the tone for a very resonant conversation on spirituality, symbolism, Christianity and Yoruba cosmology in the Black Indian tradition.

Cheveyo’s apartment was completely filled with his Mardi Gras Indian suits. He was very willing to discuss his life and dedication to the tradition. He stated his background was Creole, his lineage was Cherokee and African-American. He explained his Great Grandmother Ayo was raised at Harrison Plantation in Donaldsonville, Louisiana. Unaware that Ayo was the Yoruba word meaning “joy,” he was amazed and deeply touched by this discovery.

I don’t like the term “Mardi Gras Indians”. We associate the Native American culture with it, and their culture has nothing to do with Mardi Gras. I think we should be regarded as Native New Orleanians that celebrate a culture that our ancestors relate to Native people that started all of this….the people who loved the earth and who loved our people. They are who we are paying tribute to.
My Great Grandmother grew up on the Harrison Plantation in Donaldsonville, Louisiana. Her name was Ethel Ayo. She was a mixture of Native and African American. To this present day there is a street in Thibodeaux, Louisiana named after my family. The Native side dates way back, so I understand the connection between the Native Americans and the Slaves. (Williams/Cheveyo Interview: 2016)

Cheveyo discussed his latest project at the Behrman Elementary School program in Algiers, where he spearheaded a Mardi Gras Indian tribe for kids called the Wild Opelousas, then he showed pictures of the suits for Osun (Big Queen), the Spy Boy (Eshu) the Chief etc. He spoke about using Yoruba symbolism and cosmology in the children’s suits. He said that he didn’t know what it meant and that the theater teacher collaborated on the themes (a later
discovery was that she is an IFA initiate). He was not aware of the Yoruba themes in his own suits, and then we cross-referenced the colors/themes of Orishas on the computer.

*We just did Osun with the children with the Wild Opelousas Mardi Gras Indians, at Behrman Elementary School. A girl portrayed the Spirit Osun, and she was casting pumpkin seeds for fertility. We used peacock feathers for her crown. The Spy Boys’ suit was red and black and the Chief did the Phoenix. Each of those suits represents a transition from one state to the next. The Spy’s suit represents the changes from the negative to the positive, Osun casts out the seeds and the Wild Man had three faces, including the “Humble man” and the “Wild man.” These suits represented the students’ own transition from 8th to 9th grade into High School. The theater teacher decided that the kids would develop this crew after one of the kids brought up the idea of forming a tribe at the school. (Ibid)*

**Symbols/Signals**

Cheveyo offered detailed explanation of the meaning of signals Black Indians use as part of their journey on the streets, as well as the difference between presentation through an educational setting and on the street:

*If you want to be a school tribe that’s one thing, if you want it to be street tribe that is another. I taught them (the students) the signals. The signals in the Mardi Gras Indians culture send a message. We develop signals and songs in the Mardi Gras Indian culture just for the Indians. “Shoe Fly, Don’t Bother Me” means I don’t want that person to bother me. We try to keep all the signals above the waist. If the signals are below the waist, it means we are “digging a grave” and it is a negative thing. When you do the “shot gun” symbol, it’s called a warning shot. Spy Boy is the only one who shoots a warning shot...not literally shooting a warning shot. Back in the 1950’s they used real guns. Today it is all symbolic. (Ibid)*

**Music**

Cheveyo discussed his interpretations of Black Indian music and cosmology, and how the venerated possibly relate back to Black Hawk in the Spiritualist Church:

*When folks do the “Indian Red,” everybody is quiet, because some people call it a prayer, some people call it an Indian “national anthem,” but I think it’s more like a battle hymn. A lot of people have a lot of different takes on “Mighty Cootie Fiyo” (the initial call to the song). I believe that they are referring to a Great Chief Cootie Fiyo or even the Great Spirit. When they sing, “when they kill him dead” it is not a prayer.*
When they sing, “Oh I love to hear them call my Indian Red” they are trying to bring the tribe together. Some people also believe Mighty Cootie Fiyo was Black Hawk, who was the big voodoo Chief Spirit or Warrior Chief Spirit. (Ibid)

Black Hawk/Spiritual Church

Cheveyo elaborated:

. In my thinking, there once a Chief, beyond Tootie Montana or Bo Dollis. A lot of the Voodoo people believe Black Hawk was the Chief. “He got it done“. This is what I heard. (Ibid)

As a Christian who grew up in a Spiritualist Church, “I Am That I Am,” founded by his father Ralph Irvin on Bayou Road in a 7th Ward Creole neighborhood, he touched upon the spiritual nature of masking and the experiences he has had while in his suit:

I caught a couple of spirits who told me “you don’t belong to this tribe...you don’t belong even out here.” If I constantly sew violence into my suit, then all these spirits are sewn into the suit. When I come up on another Indian, I can feel his spirit, even at a distance. So you can pick up spirits as we walk, like sometimes we will pick up spirits in a crowd. What I do before I put my crown on, I walk away from the tribe. I hit the tambourine and get the Indians attention to start “Indian Red”. Prior to that I say, “Lord, we got different people out here with different ideas and ways...protect us.” (Ibid)

Cheveyo explained that his commitment to the church and a spiritual person has greatly informed the ways he approaches masking and his own engagement in living in the tradition:

When you asked me about the spiritual connection, we sing in church to pray and release ourselves. When I became saved and got into the whole spiritual thing, I started using the White Buffalo, to connect with God and the Great Spirit. (Ibid)

The conversation appeared to create greater clarity and focus for Big Chief Cheveyo. “Now I know a little more about why I sew what I sew, why I do what I do”. Tears flowed and our exchange was deeply felt. I had made a friend for life.
Big Chief Cheveyo with Big Queen Janelle. Photo reproduced with the permission of Kevin Turner © 2016.
Big Chief Juan Pardo, who has been evolving as a Black Indian and musician in New Orleans for the last twenty years, was currently in the studio recording a new album. He is very active as a singer and entertainer on the New Orleans music scene, and performs widely in festivals both in New Orleans and around the Gulf Coast region.

Juan Pardo explained that his first musical inspiration was through his Grandfather, originally from Panama, who came to Louisiana in the early 1900’s. His Grandmother was Haitian, asserting that his bloodline is not associated to any particular ties with Trans-Atlantic Slavery. His Native American background is Seminole, through family ancestry in Florida. He attributes his musical influences to his Grandfather, who taught him the beauty of Cuban music, clave rhythms and the Hispanic features of his family culture. The visual interpretation and expression of colors, feathers and beadwork has also been greatly
influenced by his Hispanic roots. He started masking in 2004, through the influence his brother as Spy Boy with the Golden Eagles Uptown. “Being in New Orleans, it was a natural gravitation to something that was always there. My father was a photographer, and he documented the tradition in those days,” stated Pardo. (Williams/Pardo Interview: 2016)

Pardo spoke about the role of Chiefs commanding the attention and respect of their neighborhoods, as way to assert identity in the Black community back in the 1970’s. 

I remember the 9th Ward Hunters and Big Chief Rudy, to see the way the way he commanded not only the tribe but also the whole Ward was a lot of power for one man. When they were doing it, the camaraderie, community was there because there wasn’t so much noise....today there are so many distractions. So having something in the Black community, everyone wanted to be part of it. The role for the Chief now...it is harder to keep community involved.((Ibid)

He stated that the roles for the Chief now make it harder now, because the traditions have changed so much. He said there is more focus on self-pride with social media, versus uplifting the tribe and the community as a whole.

There are a lot of changes. The role for the Chief now is to keep the tribe together... also to be able to reach to community, that role is important and yet hard to do. Today, there is so much self-pride. The community used to take pride in that Chief of that community. Today you add Facebook to it so now the self-pride aspect is amplified. (Ibid)

Pardo credits Big Chief Bo Dollis as a major voice in the tradition, the energy that could shift the paradigm of the music and culture around the World. Pardo is looking toward Dollis as his rubric for excellence and a guide to his musical development.

What I found is that I gravitate to the music. It was interesting to me to see Big Chief Bo Dollis, and his ability to command not only a nation, but also the music. For instance, there are recordings where he comes to Indian Practice and he shifts the energy so that everyone is on one accord. To see that Bo Dollis cannot only do that in New Orleans, not only in an Indian Practice, but also around the world....that is something that I wanted to be able to do. I wanted to take a song and electrify the people, because that is what he did. (Ibid)
Pardo explained that unlike some Black Indians performers who have performed the music on a commercial level, he prefers to wear an Indian suit when he performs to authentically present the tradition to audiences.

*Hearing that made me a stickler for tradition. I prefer to always perform in a suit. I like to embody the whole situation. The difference for me when I present it to people, I want to give you what it is. I want you to see it, understand it, respect it and watch it in its greatest form, its strongest impact and its greatest magnitude. (Ibid)*

**Spiritual Transformation**

He stated that when he puts the suit on, he transforms. He explained that the preparation of sewing the suit for an entire year is part and parcel of the indescribable, emotional feeling of finally putting it on.

*I’m not a Holy Roller. All I could tell you is that a photo can’t tell a story, video can’t capture it, and a storyteller couldn’t tell a good enough story to give it to you. It is literally a feeling, and the only way you get it is to go through that year of preparing that suit and putting it on. The first time my son came out with me, he was a little boy. It brought me to tears. Just that alone was an emotional thing...It is a connection that you cannot bottle up. You walk the walk or you don’t. I tell everyone there are experiences for everyone spiritually.

I see people get lost in it and I’m glad for them because at least they got to experience something. It is not a captured thing. There is so much to take in. There is so much going on, the chants, the music, and the signals. There’s so many different energies being transferred out there....Me inside the suit, I don’t even remember a lot of it, to be honest with you. That’s why I know it is transformative to me.... I’ve had whole conversations that I don’t even remember, just because I’m so in tune and it’s such a trance situation for me out there at the time. There are Indians that may do it differently, but I live in that. (Ibid)*

He believes that the drums are ceremonial and that that creates “an opening,” a portal for ancestral spirits to enter the Indian on the street.

*Being a Mardi Gras Indian, makes me feel that I want to live a life in the moment. It’s a fact that ancestral Indians, indigenous people, spirits coming in. With the drums, we know that is ceremonial, if you are into that you know that you create an opening with those drums in between the worlds of flesh and spirituality...you open that gate.*
Pardo stated that the phenomenological experience of “transformation” has happened to him many times, recalling a video he watched of himself throwing up a hatchet, that ricocheted off of the roof of a building and him jumping up to catch it, and not remembering it ever happening.

*Big Chief Juan Pardo*
Destination: New Orleans, Louisiana
Date: March 17, 2016

Interview with Alfred Doucette, Big Chief, Mardi Gras Indian Council/Singer/Performer

Popular singer and Mardi Gras Indian Chief Alfred Doucette house is situated in the 7th Ward, a beautiful pink, purple and green Victorian house, flanked by huge dogs barking and wagging their tails. Inside the Chief sat at the table and talked about his life, suits and musical pursuits.

Doucette’s brother “Merc” in the 9th Ward nurtured his interest in making Indian suits. In 1989, he started masking with Young Cheyenne. He was born in the 7th Ward in the Creole section of New Orleans from mixed ancestry, a “gumbo” of German, Acadian, African and American Indian descent.

I grew up in the 7th Ward at 2116 Rocheblave Street, five blocks away from this house. My brother Merc was masking because of a friend of ours down of the 9th Ward, who made out of Indian suits out of just about anything. In 1989, I got involved with making Indian suits. We started it to keep the kids busy. We would buy the supplies and have the kids sit down and making suits to keep them busy.

(Williams/Doucette Interview: 2016)

His great-grandfather was a Choctaw Indian who built ships as his primary trade. Doucette professes a carpenter by trade himself, but now concentrates mainly on being a “singer/songwriter”.

My Great Great Grandmother was German. There’s a woman from Australia who is doing a documentary on the Doucettes. She said that the Cajuns said they had nothing to do with the Africans, but that’s a lie. We are all hooked up down here. My Great Great Grandfather was a ship-builder. He was part Choctaw Indian. This transformed me because it gave me some information on why I can do what I can do. All my people were carpenters. My Great Grandfather on my mama’s side was African, but I don’t know from where. (Ibid)
He stated that he “feels different” when he puts on the suit but didn’t elaborate on the “feeling” but more on the story-telling aspect of the tradition. He states that many people taught him how to sew and create, including his mother, who was a seamstress when he was child.

*Canvas, a pencil and beads* has created an image and thousands of people want to see it. All of my suits tell stories. All these guys are sewing on bed sheets, sewing on cardboard, and I tell ’em, “you need to stop that...you need to sew on canvas, because you might sew a masterpiece.” In my time, people took time to show me.

The Mardi Gras Indian culture is changing because we taught the younger generation to sew, but the new generation is buying their patches. I will tell the new generation, “learn to sew....learn to discipline your mind.” When you are making an Indian suit, you are making a suit the most beautiful thing anyone has ever seen. You got to sew it on canvas to keep it alive. (Ibid)

He attributes the “spirits” and the Holy Spirit for the gift of him still being alive and giving him the ability to create today. He is firm believer of Jesus Christ. However, he does speak extensively about New Orleans Voodoo priestess *Marie Laveau* and her influence on him as a musician/songwriter. He told me that she came to him in his dreams, where she gave him the lyrics for “Marie Laveau”, adapted from the popular Indian song “Little Liza Jane,

*It’s the Spirit that’s got me here. You listen to the Spirit because the spirit will talk to you... I am a firm believer in Jesus Christ, and every day I see the light I thank him for another day.*

*All my music, I feel that I’m doing.... I wake up with a whole song in my head. I just go to sleep and wake up singing. If Marie (Laveau) be on my mind, I wake up singing most of the time. I think that she knocked on my door because she’s got a message she got to get out, she is using me as a messenger.....You got to be careful on words that you are slingin’ because you might raise spirits or raise the dead. I don’t want to raise up no spirits...*

*I’ve always believed in the power of the Spirit, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. I know why they crucified him and I know why he died. I believe in it one hundred percent. I believe there is another world.* (Ibid)
His first suit was a “Brother John” theme related to the song by the Neville Brothers, “Brother John is Gone”, a story of an Indian killed on the streets, when violence was common back in the old days of masking. He showed several of his suits with various impactful socio-cultural themes: Slavery, Marie Laveau, and lynching in “Strange Fruit”, Christ & the Crucifixion (see below). Doucette has expressed the cultural issues felt in his heart and mind through the artistry of his suits and his music, knowing that they will serve as his enduring legacy. “When you close your eyes you might never open them again. I don’t fear death, because I know where my after-life is,” said Doucette.
Mardi Gras Indian Dow Michael Edwards, a.k.a. Spy-Boy Dow of the Mohawk Hunters, was a former pro football player, a receiver for the New England Patriots, and is currently a well-regarded attorney in the Crescent City. Dow received his B.S. (1983) from Oklahoma Panhandle State University with a degree in Business Administration. He received his J.D. (2000) from Southern University Law Center, where he graduated cum laude.

His perspectives regarding the art form and his musings about the origins of the tradition are based on years of observation and study. Dow started the interview in casual dress, having just come from his workshop, placing final touches on his Grandson’s suit for Super Sunday, surrounded by his colorful art collection. He is an avid collector of both New Orleans and indigenous art, and has been profiled by Black Art in America.

Even though Dow has been interviewed about his involvement in masking Indian in the past, he has not spoken directly to the origins or spiritual aspects of the culture. Born and raised in New Orleans, he left to go to college in Oklahoma. Even though he knew people of Native descent but didn’t immerse himself in the culture.
He spoke about the violence on the streets in the early days of the culture, which was not a deterrent to Dow, who was thoroughly intrigued and enthralled with the Indians.

I was first introduced at the age of five. Grandma lived Uptown on Baronne between 6th and 7th. On Mardi Gras morning, my uncle took us to see the Indians. Grandma did not want us to see them because of the violence. We went to see them anyway. I remember that there was blood on the ground. I wasn’t caught up in fear or drama, but it was so exciting. This was in 1966. In the early 1940’s, when the WPA made the documentary “Gumbo Ya Ya,” they followed the Golden Blades and the Creole Wild West. There was a move of foot by Big Chief Bo Dollis and all the Chiefs towards non-violence, doing away with “Humbug” on the streets. No Chief enjoyed the violence, as it was their job to make sure all their tribe members got home safe. Most believed that humbug was started by the second line members behind the gang anyway. (Williams/Dow Interview, 2016)

Much later in life, after a career in professional sports and forging a career as an accomplished attorney, Dow recounts his own personal journey to become an Indian.

This was in 2007-2008. Tyrone (Casby) from the Mohawk Hunters on the Westbank taught me how to sew. Their style was more bead and sequin style, but I told him that I wanted to sew a traditional “story suit” with seed beads like the Uptown Indians, and he said “OK.” Each suit tells a complete story and that’s what I wanted to do.

My first suit was a Thunderbird inspiration from Native American conflict stories. My second suit was based on the story of the White Buffalo and the Eagle, the third was a Wolf suit. They were all spirit animals. My fifth suit was dedicated to Buffalo Soldiers & Indians, their inter-relationship, fighting oppression. The sixth suit was inspired by a surrealistic vision after taking peyote in the dessert. Each suit has been a spiritual journey. I have been fortunate to do some pretty high-end things in life, but there’s been no greater excitement than putting that suit on. (Ibid).

Spiritual Transformation

Dow claims that part of this journey is one of self-transformation, particularly when he puts on his regalia and hears the music start to play.

I am not naming the person I am outside of the suit. The role of the music plays an important part in this feeling. African culture tells stories of our ancestors. Songs like “Shallow Water” are paying respect to our ancestors. If you knew what it was to be inside that suit….I want to get back to experiencing it on the regular. (Ibid)
He has specific beliefs about the origins of the Black Indians, which were fostered by his hobby of collecting art over the years. Through personal interest, he started to learn more about the African cultures represented in the work and the connections to his own tradition.

I am an art collector. One year I went to Jazz Fest to find some new pieces. I went to the Haitian Pavilion, and when I saw the beading on the Haitian Voodoo flags, the beading was the very same as the Indian suits in Congo Square. I bought a statue from the Buea region of Cameroon. They have a “spy society” there, with members whose job it is to go out in front of the Chief in the procession to look for potential harm, just like the “Spy Boy” in the Indian gang. That is the reality about it.

Dow learned about the cultural history of the Black Indians, particularly about slave revolts, and “Code Noire” which allowed the African slaves, Haitians and Indians to play drums in Congo Square. Dow isn’t sure whether this information would be helpful to contemporary Black Indians, but was quite clear that there were myths and urban legends that are incorrect in the tradition.
They tell the story that has been told to them. The Indians do the same thing today...they imitate Plains Indians. I do want to dispel the notion that this came from the Buffalo Bill Cody Wild West show.

The stones they use, the rhythms and the chants are essentially African. We need to know the true History. There are African roots, religion and spirituality that moved through Trinidad, Tobago and Haiti. There is also Native spirituality. I really know this, having people involved in it and moved by it so much. (Ibid)

The depth of Spy Boy Dow’s knowledge about the tradition was refreshing and illuminating. It is apparent that he has done a great deal of research on his own and made cultural connections and conclusions about the tradition, of which only a few Black Indians have been able to arrive.
Spy Boy Dow Edwards and his grandson Cruz on Uptown Super Sunday. Photo by Robin Williams ©2016.
Big Chief Demond Melancon-Yoruba Influence

Fig. 1: Yoruba Egungun (Ancestor) Masquerade for a ceremony for deceased King Ofuntola of Oyotunji Village. Photo by Robin Williams ©2016.

Fig. 2: Big Chief Demond Melancon in Black Indian regalia, New Orleans. Photo: Demond Melancon; reprinted with permission by Demond Melancon.
Big Chief Demond Melancon of the Young Seminole Hunters represents the next generation of master bead artists in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. Many progenitors in the tradition have been observing his process of creating large-scale beadwork, laden with African themes over the last several years. His burgeoning social media presence promotes his artistry, which is visibly pushing the boundaries of what is possible through the art of masking Indian. Melancon is known for the African and African-American themes of resistance depicted in his suits. Melancon’s house in the Upper 9th Ward reflects his spiritual foundation and also reflects his artistic and historical depth. At the front of the traditional shotgun style house, next to the front door, is painted a large portrait of Ethiopian Emperor Haille Selassie.

Big Chief Melancon is a young Chief. At 34 years of age, he has already been masking for twenty-two years, having learned to sew in the 7th Ward, and masking with a 3-D suit under one of Tootie Montana’s spin-off gangs at age 13. Melancon’s passion for demonstrating history and culture to the youth, who follow the Indians in the community, came from his early engagement in the tradition.

_In Junior H.S. all my friends, instead of playing basketball, they were Indians.....On St. Joseph’s night I went to their house and they had Indian suits. The next year I started sewing. They told me it (the tradition) all originally came from Tootie....about a year after I started masking with them, I masked with plumes and rhinestones, with the Seminoles. I was brought to Big Chief Ferdinand Bigard, Sr. He taught me the history of the culture. He taught me the Indian side and the African side . He loved the Native side strong._

(Williams/Melancon Interview: 2016)

His narrative beadwork is masterfully crafted, colorful and almost three times larger than most traditional suits “there is a lot of history that needs to be told,” he explained. He
also spoke of the comparison of the beadwork to the Yoruba in Benin and Nigeria, and said that it the Mardi Gras Indians are like “Gods coming onto the streets” on Mardi Gras morning.

*I feel it so strong, that I am praying and praying….it’s serious. When I put it on its not me no more....When I was a Spy Boy it was a spirit that I carried. I carried Nathanial Wood. Spy Boy Nat taught me a lot, so his spirit rode with me. When I put the suit on, I become at a higher height. (Ibid)*

He demonstrated how his beaded patches are multi-layered like the Egungun, and discussed the principles of the spiritual energy that emanates from the suit…

*I know that it is connected to those spirits, because I feel them around me when I’m sewing. Only certain Indians in this City can connect like that....Before he passed, Chief Black Feather, Lionel Delpit, had that spiritual connection, also Victor with the Fi Yi Yi ... it’s a certain thing that comes over you when you sew, that is why the suits come out the way they do. Everybody is not like that though.... (Ibid)*

His motivation to mask is simple, but strong, “The main reason why I mask, I do it to try to evolve with the elders, what they died for, and what they struggled for.”

*Big Chief Demond Melancon sewing an elaborate beaded apron, 2015. Photo reprinted with permission by Demond Melancon.*
“Big Frank” Washington grew up in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition with his cousins in the Lower 9th Ward, under the tutelage of Ferdinand Bigard of the Cheyenne Black Indians tribe. Along the way, he imparted his knowledge for this project through his family, many of who had been masking since the 1940’s. We journeyed to New Orleans East to interview his cousin Pat Roubion, who lives in an Assisted Living facility. Roubion’s apartment was sparse, accept for a table and chairs and a couch. The most prominent and noticeable features of the room was his arrangement of framed photos of him donning his Mardi Gras Indian suits on the wall.

At age 73, Roubion highlighted his long and storied history of sewing in the sculptural Downtown three-dimensional style under the influence of Big Chief Tootie Montana. He recanted his memory of Indian music practices at Larry Smith’s Bar, and the Peddler’s Inn on Tonti and Dorgenois Street, with a group of ten in his tribe. He spoke about coming out for the first time:
When you put on that suit and come out for the first time in front of that crowd, it is a feeling that I cannot explain to you, you could feel it in your heart. You really feel like a different person. You feel like the spirit is touching you...It’s beautiful. It’s a heck of a feeling...

(Williams/Roubion Interview 2016)

In 1981, when Mayor Dutch Morial had a police strike on Mardi Gras, he recalls how the Indians were the “show” that year because the Mayor cancelled Mardi Gras.

I met Tootie Montana on St. Philip and Claiborne.... The Policemen had a strike. We didn’t have an inch of trouble, even without the policemen on the street. All of the Indians masked. (Ibid)

He talked about his bout with bladder cancer and his retirement from masking, as well as his desire to mask again. He also mentioned to Frank about their Chitimacha Indian heritage, and explained that Frank’s Grandfather was Chief Mora of the Chitimacha. Frank was absolutely floored by this new information from his cousin Pat, which had served to answer many of the mysterious, unanswered questions he had about his parents’ concerns about him masking Indian. Internally, he never truly understood what propelled him to be so passionate about the culture, yet never have the opportunity to mask on Mardi Gras morning. This epiphany encouraged us to make a research trip to the Chitimacha tribal center in Charenten, Louisiana a few days later.

Frank and I spoke directly to the Kimberly S. Walden, the Tribal preservation historian for the Chitimachas, and confirmed his lineage back to the Moras, specifically Chief Mora. As mentioned earlier in this study, the Chitimachas history has always been significant in the larger story about the cultural connections between Africans and Indians. The history lesson was illuminating for both of us and confirmed the underlying impetus for Frank’s thirst for knowing about his heritage; how it had affected his engagement in various aspects of Black Indian culture of the years. After our trip to the reservation to learn more about his ancestral ties to the culture, Frank consented to being interviewed:
I know we had a tie to the Native Americans, which came from my mom’s side through Chief Mora. All I been trying to do for the last 30 years is learn where it came from…. I never really understood my bloodline, and never really knew how deep it was and how rich it was until today. (Williams: Washington 2016)

Even though Frank has never masked, he learned to sew and assisted the Indians preparing for and masking on Mardi Gras morning.

I became a part of the Seminoles in the 8th Ward. I learned to sew from Joe Pete and Ferdinand Bigard. My parents wouldn’t let me have anything to do with the Indians. At that time I didn’t know anything about my family having Chitimacha blood. They thought Manual was mocking the Native American culture. (Ibid)

Growing up in the Creole neighborhoods of the 7th Ward, Frank had a desire to mask at an early age.

There was a guy from across the street from my house by the name Manual Gaspar, who was the Spy Boy for the White Eagles. I was about five or six old….that was always part of my life on Mardi Gras day….Manual coming out of that house. This was in the 7th Ward, between Allen Street and Johnson. It was 6 o’clock in the morning….but Manual was wild and crazy and everyone wanted to see him perform. (Ibid)

Instead of masking himself, Frank decided to become a musician instead, going on to sing and play bass in many bands in New Orleans and around the country.

I’m a singer and all of that came from the Mardi Gras Indians. I was influenced by a fella who was the first one who was approached to do an album of Mardi Gras Indian music, Gerald Emil. He turned it down because he said “this is my culture and it’s not for sale”. I thought it was a noble thing to do, because we as a people, they are always trying to take from us. Today there is not a passion, not a feeling or quality about the music anymore. Singers like Big Chief Bo Dollis, Big Chief Jolly, and Big Chief Monk Boudreaux….these people sang…..you could feel the passion in these people. They were living their ancestry through their song. It flowed through their veins. (Ibid)
Fig. 1 Big Chief Pat Roubion. Fig. 2: “Big Frank” Washington, my “body guard” for the journey, making a pilgrimage to the Chitimacha Indian Reservation in Chariton, Louisiana. Photo credit: Robin Williams ©2016
The inquiry of this journey started with Big Chief Bo Dollis in 1997. Bo Dollis Jr. understood that the journey would end with him. After his father died last year, Gerard Dollis (Little Bo) has struggled to fill the shoes of his world-renowned father Theodore Emile “Bo” Dollis, the inimitable voice of the Mardi Gras Indian sound in New Orleans and around the World for over the last fifty years. He contributed a revealing interview, the subject matter of which primarily dealt with his desire to assume a more active role in community leadership, as well as his experiences in the spiritual implications of masking and venerating the ancestors.

The scene of the interview was Gerard’s family barbershop “Touch of Class,” Uptown on Louisiana Avenue. Always abuzz with activity, the barbershop was unusually quiet on this day. Gerard seemed relieved that the Mardi Gras and Super Sunday events were completed. He had been under an immense amount of pressure to run his father’s business, maintain the legacy of the Wild Magnolias tribe, and keep members busy sewing and preparing for the next season since his father’s death in 2015. He stated his intentions were not to mask this year, and take a break, but his tribe urged him to maintain the momentum of the legacy left by his father: a masking tribe, a full-time touring musical and recording career and a family life.
He started masking thirty years ago, “being nosy” as he puts it, watching his daddy making suits and preparing for Mardi Gras Day. His mother tried to discourage him from masking because of the violence on the streets in those days:

*I wound up cutting up one of her purses and getting the beads off of it, and after that, there was no stopping. My Mom really didn’t really want me to do it….then, when I got older, I wanted to carry the tradition on.*

(Williams/Dollis:2016)

When asked where he thinks the Mardi Gras Indian tradition comes from, Gerard spoke upon the limitations of Blacks’ participation at Mardi Gras and their desire to start their own celebration.

*Just like my Dad said, it started from us paying tribute to the Indians. The Slaves ran to the Indians to get help. A long time after, Blacks could not go to Canal Street and St. Charles and the popular areas so we started our own the Mardi Gras….so that’s when Mardi Gras Indians, Baby Dolls, Skeleton men, even Zulu were going around the neighborhoods and we started our own Mardi Gras.(Ibid)*

When asked about the spiritual experiences of his father being gone, he said that it seems his father and his fellow Chiefs are coming through him, especially when he becomes “Bo Jr.” on stage. He said that singing and performing transforms him into someone he is not normally in his everyday life.

He said that because of the energy inside him, he does not feel the pain of wearing his crown or the lively performance antics that ensue when he is on stage…until he “ends up in the hospital the next day.” In this interview, Gerard talked about “catching spirit” inside the suit.

*That’s whenever I put a suit on….. I just start dancing and singing like I was on Mardi Gras Day…It’s like on Mardi Gras morning, when you put that suit on you just get in a whole other zone. I’m not Gerard no more, you know…I become “Bo” then. Ever since I was little, I turn into another person. And some of my friends used to be like. they don’t come see me because I don’t speak to them…I’m just gone. Now when I get out of it, I’ll come speak to you, but while I’m in it, I’m a whole other person. You can’t explain it…It’s just the suit that does it to you. (Ibid)*
He believes it is the spirit of his father and all of the other Chiefs who have passed on, trying to come back “One More Time,” as in the song his father made famous.

My dad used to catch (spirit) and get in that zone….when I catch it I know what to do to myself to calm down a little. Even when you are in the Indian suit, you have to know what to do to come out of it. It might be the wrong time to get into it.... At French Quarter Fest, I caught it being on stage. You just never know when you are going to get in that zone, you’re just in it.....It could be the Indian Suit, it could be the ancestors, it could be my Dad....it could be the Indians that I was close to that passed, it could be a multiple of things.

(Ibid)

In the future, Gerard thinks that even with increased media attention and focus being placed on Mardi Gras Indians, which has always been a “secret society”, the tradition will still maintain its enigmatic features.

You still have to keep the tradition, you still have to put the hours into sewing...the media is not going to break it...you’ll still have other generations coming behind it. Just like me, I have to keep it going from where my Dad left off at, and I still keep some things under wraps....as far as how I put it together and how I teach my Indians, so they (media) would never know things like that.....(Ibid)
AFRICANS & INDIANS-TRACING NATIVE ROUTES

DESTINATION: Grand Village of the Natchez Indians, Natchez, Mississippi
DATE: March 22, 2016 - 5:00-7:00 PM
Self-guided tour of the Mound

Photo credit: R. Williams 2016

Emerald Mound in Natchez, Mississippi is the site that was featured in the play “Brotherhood in Congo Square.” The Grand Village is inside Natchez, houses an on-site historian, exhibits, artifacts, library and gift shop. Emerald Mound is located off the Natchez Trace Parkway-about thirty minutes into the parkway. The steep forty-foot mound is the second largest in America.

It was a long and solitary drive from the Natchez Indian reservation site inside the City of Natchez to the mound. When I arrived, there was absolutely no one around. My dog and I scaled the 40-foot mound. When we arrived at the top, I noticed 4 eagles circling round and around the mound as if they were appointed guardians. I literally had a strong physical reaction standing on top of the mound—it felt like a strong spiritual energy force was twirling around it. According to research at the Chitimacha Reservation with tribal Historian Kim Walden, who several years ago was in attendance for a re-burial of Chiefs from several regional tribes. Now I have a deeper understanding as to why my journey to Emerald Mound proved to be a very powerful and profound site visit, particularly as a person of Native heritage.
INDIAN PROCESSIONS

DESTINATION: Algiers Point, Louisiana
DATE: April 17, 2016 - 9-11:00 PM

West Bank Super Sunday Procession. 18 archival videos/32 archival photos shot of various tribes, including Chief Cheveyo’s Wild Opelousas, Wild Tchoupitoulas, Mohawk Hunters and Spirit of Fi Yi Yi.

Chief Cheveyo and the Wild Opelousas walked the entire route, inside the procession.

Most of the tribes had their own drum and tambourine units, except for the Cheyenne Hunters, who had the largest tribe, but marched to the music of other tribes present. It was the first time that the Wild Opelousas Behrman school youth tribe took to the streets to participate alongside the adults as a bonafide tribe. City of New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu came to march with and lend support to the youth.
*Photos on pages 105-107: Super Sunday Uptown & Westbank celebrations.

Fig.1 & 2: Unidentified. Fig: 3 “Little Chief” Cheyenne Hunters. Photos: Robin Williams © 2016.
DESTINATION: Verret’s Lounge-Uptown-New Orleans, Louisiana
DATE: February 28, 2017-MARDI GRAS DAY

The author’s honorary day to mask with Big Chief Cheveyo & the Black Mohawks

During field research, I was gratified to rekindle old relationships and make new friends. The intimate nature of our myriad conversations about the connective threads between spirituality and the creative process opened many doors of understanding; fostering a deeper sense of purpose for myself as a researcher, and ultimately for some of the participants. In particular, Big Chief Cheveyo, Kevin Turner of the new tribe Creole Cheveyo really blossomed after our conversations. In the year after our interview, Cheveyo has accomplished an amazing amount of progress on all fronts in his spiritual life, community service and masking pursuits. It is my hope that the depth of our exchanges put some wind beneath his “feathered wings”, as he has surely started to fly with several new exhibit opportunities, and the creation of his new tribe Creole Cheveyo. The celebration of his 10th Anniversary masking, is charted to debut at the historic site of New Orleans musical legend Professor Longhair’s house, hosted by Fess’ daughter Pat Byrd for the 2018 Tri-Centennial.

I was deeply honored when he invited me to mask with him and his former tribe, the Black Mohawks on Mardi Gras morning 2017. Started in 1930, the current Black Mohawks tribe is presided over by Big Chief Walter "Sugar Bear" Landry. The Black Mohawks’ Second chief, who often-times “brings the gang” for select parades and community events is Bear's son, Chief Byron "Duck" Thomas.

Sugar Bear has been masking over 60 years, holding down the tradition and cultivating the next generation of Black Indians by teaching classes for interested youth at
Xavier Prep. On this day, I had the pleasure of meeting him for the first time. He was not masking. Big Chief, his wife Gilda, Chief Byron “Duck” Thomas warmly welcomed me.

The anticipation inside Verret’s Lounge, the local bar that serves as headquarters for the Black Mohawks every year, was percolating. There was an indescribable swirling kind of energy amidst all of the massive plumes, headdresses and other pieces of regalia. Chief Cheveyo had instructed me to wear my traditional elk/deerskin Pow-wow dress. I created a war bonnet with eagle feathers and included both Mardi Gras Indian sequined patches and traditional Native American beaded rosettes in the design to speak to both traditions. Having danced in Pow-wows for many years, I have always carried a “prayer fan”. This fan is
traditionally utilized in the dance circle by buckskin dress dancers, raising it to the sun when the ceremonial host drum plays accentuated “honor beats” to send praise to the Great Spirit. For this occasion, I created a prayer fan with eagle feathers, white ostrich plumes and a beautiful beaded eagle patch gifted to me by Chief Cheveyo.

My goal was to honor my own Native traditions while paying homage to theirs, ultimately reflecting the union that has long existed between our cultures. From my mother’s side, through my Great-Grandfather, I am “Talking Eagle,” a third generation member of the Miami Nation. My Great-Grandfather Jerome DeMotte grew up in Peru, Indiana, on the banks of the Wabash River, next to the Seven Sacred Pillars, a place where in 2008, my daughter Colette and I were blessed in the river and a peace-pipe ceremony presided over by Chief Buchanan of the Miami Tribe.

I had always observed Black Indians on the street or on stage, but never envisioned myself in the procession on Mardi Gras morning. It was a humbling and gratifying experience. A film crew appeared from Dallas, and one of the young women identified herself as a daughter of famed Afro-Cuban percussionist Armando Perazza. We had a very robust discussion about the African retentions in Afro-Cuban music,
spirituality and how it is all connected to the Black Indian culture. At the point when all the tribal members finished dressing in their regalia, we all went outside and formed a circle in front of Verret’s. Big Chief Landry hit the tambourine and the sung prayer “Indian Red” commenced. “Might-yyy Cootie Fiyo!” We all joined in. I understood that this was a “raising of the spirit”, the preparation we needed to start the procession down Washington Street.

Big Queen Gilda called to me to make sure I was in the proper place in the procession, as I knew nothing of the protocol. I was surprised that she placed me toward the front behind a beautiful couple, Spyboy Kerry and Spy Queen Lorenza, resplendent in turquoise plumes and peacock feathers. I believe I was there because my turquoise and white buck/elk dress blended in well into the mélange of colorful plumes, feathers and beads in the tribe. I raised my prayer fan to Great Spirit with reverence and ultimate thanks for the experience, and off we went down the street. My fiancé at the time, Maynard Eaton, had
never been to Mardi Gras before, so he stayed behind to “people watch” and take pictures of the various Indian tribes coming through.

I was not sure what to expect, and even though I had witnessed many processions over the last twenty-five years, the energy felt from the sidelines was nothing like the intensity of being in the midst of the Indians. I felt nothing but love from the people on the route, as we walked down towards 2nd and Dryades street, to the crossroads where tribes traditionally meet each other. “Hey Pocahontas!”, yelled a man as he smiled from ear to ear. It was interesting to feel the shift in the energy and gaze of young, mostly Caucasian, college-age kids once we arrived at Dryades street. They weren’t smiling as much, some quizzically looking at me with expressions of wonderment as to what I might be doing there.

Having danced in Pow-wows over the years with Natives “of all shades,” the stately Black Cherokee male fancy dancer and the blonde, blue-eyed Cherokee and Miami females, I know what it means to embrace your heritage, simply because it deeply embedded in your soul. Dancing in the Pow-wow circle has its rules and protocols, however, fitting the stereotype of “what a Native looks like” does not necessarily apply. The sacred circle is all about Spirit, not about the shade of your skin, hair or eyes.

I was beyond honored to have the experience of masking with the Black Mohawks, thanks to my friend Chief Cheveyo. It was a feeling I will never forget. Upon reflection, I remembered some difficult conversations I have had with fellow Native Americans over the years, many of whom view this as a mockery of our Native culture. I have tried to the best of my abilities to explain the intricacies and efficacies of Black Indian masking to my brethren and sistren in the culture. Many question the motive of “masking Indian” instead of appreciating the “tribute” to the Native tribes who historically embraced Africans being symbolized in the very act of masking. I wish culture bearers would arrive at the
understanding that the African-rooted masking of Black Indians represents an ancestral “cultural bridge” built by commonality of both spirit and Spirit. Our tandem alliances, born three hundred years ago—a brotherhood forged in resistance for the fight for freedom—should be respected.
CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

To contend that Black Indian traditions reflect African cultural retentions is strong, credible, relevant, and qualified. The research of authors such as David Elliot Draper, George Lipsitz, Lucy Duran, Cynthia Becker, Margaret Thompson Drewel and others used in this study demonstrate correlations of Black Indian music, regalia, and carnival/procession traditions to specific examples found in various parts of Africa and the Diaspora. The information gathered from personal interviews with Ibrahima Seck, Ronald Lewis, Herreast Harrison, Big Chief Demond Melancon and documented commentary of Fi Yi Yi Chief Victor Harris supports these theories. The visual footage and photographs rendered at Oyotunji African Village demonstrate the similarities of Yoruba designs and ritual traditions and those of the Black Indians.

Black Indian traditions are also cross-culturally supported by the direct music and linguistic comparisons of Mardi Gras Indian chants and lyrics outlined in Drew Hinshaw’s ethnographic experience in Ghana, West Africa, as well as the past research of Alan Lomax, Melville Herskovits, Ned Sublette and others. My personal interviews with ethnomusicologist Bernard Woma, Ewe musician Andrew Wiseman, and Ibrahima Seck in the field underscore the common linguistic and musical core, which is strongly tied to West African foundations.

African ritual and religious context, which has survived in this tradition over the last three hundred years in America, is strongly supported by the correlative findings of Steven Wehmeyer, Jason Berry, Margaret Drewel Thompson, Robert Farris Thompson and others. These ethnographers illuminate the connections of Yoruba and Congolese influence, syncretism with Native American icons such as Black Hawk, and tributes to Saint Joseph and other Saints from the cosmology of the Catholic Church. The field interviews with
Spiritualist Church Bishop Oliver Coleman and curator Ronald Lewis, coupled with intimate details from interviews with several Chiefs, Flag Boys and Spy Boys, most of whom admitted to “catching spirit” while in their suits, as well as the videos captured of phenomenological experiences of Indians and musicians on the street at St. Joseph’s night and during Super Sunday events, validate that spiritualism is very much alive in the tradition. The discovery of rare music by the Wild Magnolias, describing the direct relationship between Black Hawk and the Mardi Gras Indians, further validated that unique connection.

**Conclusions**

Retaining and maintaining cultural roots, patterns, language, and artistic sensibilities over space and time is viable. This would explain the level of African cultural retention in the Black Indian art form; a contemporary practice of traditions rooted within a “living and embodied memory,” which is central to this retention.

In Camille Chambers’ article in the 2012 *Journal of the Vodou Archive*, the author cites the significance of African-American master dancer Katherine Dunham’s research on drumming and dance in the invocation of Iwa and Loa deities in Haiti, introducing the idea that the ritual drums and dances serve as a catalyst for “living memory and embodied memory.” These memory patterns reinforced by ritualistic dance and drumming, contribute to the cultural retention of people who live and practice the religion daily (Chambers 2012, 6).

This type of living and embodied memory allows African cultural retention to serve as the core and origin of the Black Indian masking tradition of New Orleans. Through this research, Black Indians, while inspired by many literal and evolutionary influences from their ancestors, continue to demonstrate an intimate and enduring connection to the African Continent.
**Recommendation: Life beyond the Study**

I am writing this study on the cusp of the Tricentennial (1718-2018) of the City of New Orleans. With the precipice of my study built upon African cultural retention, focused on the historical underpinnings of the creation of the city, this is an ideal time to unveil a credible theory on the true origins of the Mardi Gras Indians.

Since the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, this culture has been spotlighted as never before. Several documentaries about leading Mardi Gras Indian Tribal Chiefs and books have been created to demonstrate its importance as a unique cultural art form. Despite the increased interest about the art form, not one book or film has offered any relevant theory about the origins of the phenomenon.

In 2015 the music legend Big Chief Bo Dollis, recipient of the National Endowment of the Arts “National Heritage Award” died. His young son has now taken the helm of the music, and the tradition is evolving further. Mardi Gras Indians were recently ushered into Pop culture as well, as audiences worldwide viewed portrayals of Mardi Gras Indians. With the portrayal of Big Chief Lambreaux, based on Big Chief Donald Harrison in television shows such as HBO’s “Treme”, wider audiences were exposed to and learned about the tradition. For the first time, people around the world understood that the phenomenon even existed.

In 2016, Beyoncé featured a young Indian Queen in her video “Lemonade” (Donnella: 2016) and Indians were featured in a pictorial essay in Vogue Magazine “Portraits in Style: The New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians” (Carlos: 2016). What will happen with such an illuminative spotlight on a tradition, which has largely until now, been a secretive phenomenon?
I personally believe the media hype creates a need for urgent discourse. The entire picture of the Black Indian tradition, its cultural resonance, and ultimately, its role as one of America’s most intimate and enduring connections to the African Continent must be painted.

**Serving the Mardi Gras Indian Culture for the Future**

In August 2015, Arts Place America awarded a $500,000 grant to the *New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian Council* to create a center to ensure their traditions continue. Nicholas Jenisch, *Tulane City Center* project manager, along with students and faculty from the *Tulane School of Architecture*, began working with members of the council to create a headquarters in Central City that would preserve and advance their traditions.

When completed, this research will be of value to this project, and others centered around New Orleans Tri-Centennial celebrations. As a curator and director of several cultural institutions over the years, I have developed exhibitions, which interpret historical information and artifacts. I hope that I may be able to do the same for the new Mardi Gras Indian Council Center by using the information gathered during the course of my fieldwork and the final outcomes of my thesis project. I would also like to facilitate a partnership with the *Whitney Plantation* to create cross-cultural presentations, which celebrate the connection between Egungun ancestral and other forms of West African masquerade traditions and Mardi Gras Indian processions.

**Big Queens: Making a Difference in the Community**

I also hope to be able to support the Tribal Queens, who have played a pivotal role in celebrating the culture, spearheading community initiatives, and creating important programs to educate young people about their heritage and culture. The *Guardians of the Flame Book Club* project, spearheaded by Herreast Harrison and Big Queen Cherice Harrison-Nelson has
provided thousands of books to New Orleans schoolchildren. Harrison-Nelson has also founded the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame.

*Big Queen Laurita Barras Dollis,* the late Big Chief Bo Dollis’ wife, has helped to spearhead many local community fund drives for hurricane and regional storm relief, several annual community family and children’s activities, and is the founder and President of *Queens of the Nation,* a vibrant and active Mardi Gras Indian women’s organization, which fosters the power and solidarity of the women in the culture, and the importance of women transporting the culture forward for future generations.

To research and write about a subject is illuminating but only on so many levels. How is all of this reconciled when analyzing music culture and forming personal mission and vision as our individual roles as ethnomusicologists develop? Knowledge and understanding gives us the power to decide what that role looks like.

Some will decide to settle for knowledge. Others may choose to take a more active, hands-on advocacy role in helping a society preserve their music culture.

As advocates who aid cultural communities in strengthening and maintaining their cultural identities through resources and programming, ethnomusicologists can make a difference. I have chosen the hands-on approach and will continue using this approach throughout my creative life.
Bibliography


LeCompte, Margaret D. and Jean J. Schensul. 2010. “Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research,” 2nd ed. *Alta Mira Press*, Walnut Creek, CA


MEDIA:


Maroon St. Malo, June 19, 2014. Divine Prince Ty Emmecca and Andrew Wiseman perform a vodun ceremony to honor the spirit of the venerated St. Maroon or St. Malo in front of the Cabildo, Jackson Square New Orleans, the site where he was hung to death in 1784.. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32krHDIXpd0


NOLA.com. Accessed 02/10/2015. Mardi Gras Indian Chief Victor Harris of Fi-Yi-Yi prepares for ‘day of blessing and healing’
http://www.nola.com/mardigras/index.ssf/2013/02/mardi_gras_indian_chief_victor.ht


Wild Magnolias at the Tribute for Big Chief "Bo" Dollis. Accessed 04/01/2014.
March 19, 2014 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34BGu9KUbKs

All photographs/media were personally shot and collected during Field Research 2009-2016 by Robin Williams and are copyrighted as such.

New Orleans, Louisiana
March 19, 2016- 9-11:00 PM
St. Joseph’s Night at Kermit Ruffin’s Bar on Claiborne. 14 archival videos shot, primarily of Big Chief Victor Harris and the Spirit of the Fi Yi Yi and the Flaming Arrows chanting.

New Orleans, Louisiana
March 20, 2016- 12:00-5:00 PM

Algiers Point, Louisiana
April 17, 2016- 1:00-6:00 PM
West Bank Super Sunday Procession. 18 archival videos/32 archival photos shot of various tribes, including Chief Cheveyo’s Wild Opelousas (pictured with Mayor Mitch Landrieu) Wild Tchoupitoulas, Mohawk Hunters and Spirit of Fi Yi Yi.
APPENDICES

**Additional Photos re-printed by special arrangement and permission of The Historic New Orleans Collection, as well as photographers and ethnographers include the following:

Appendix 1

Pages 36 & 39:

Fig.1: Young Oliver Coleman, channeling the spirit as Black Hawk, Infant Jesus of Prague Church, New Orleans, 1975. Fig 2: Black Hawk altar at the Israelite Spiritual Church, New Orleans, 1980 (pg.37). Photo ethnography by Michael P. Smith, from the book “Spirit World” reproduced with permission from ©The Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center.

Appendix 2

Page vii:

Big Chief Theodore Emile “Bo” Dollis of the WILD MAGNOLIAS. Photo reprinted with permission from photographer Anthony Walker Shaw, ©copyright 2009.

Appendix 3

Page 3:

Big Chief Victor Harris of the SPIRIT OF THE FI YI YI. Photo reprinted with permission from photographer Phillip Colwart ©copyright 2009.

Appendix 4

Pages 77-81:

Archive Photo- Ethel Ayo: Reproduced with the permission of K.Turner ©2016

Big Chief Cheveyo with the Wild Opelousas School tribe he helped to create at Behrman Elementary in Algiers Point, Louisiana. Photo reproduced with the permission of; Kevin Turner ©2016.

Big Chief Cheveyo with Big Queen Janelle. Photo reproduced with the permission of Kevin Turner © 2016.

Appendix 5

Page 22:

Big Chief Demond Melancon leading music at the funeral procession for Big Chief Bo Dollis in New Orleans, January 31st, 2015, Reprinted with permission of Demond Melancon.
Pages 94-96:

Fig.2: Big Chief Demond Melancon in Black Indian regalia, New Orleans. Photo: Demond Melancon; reprinted with permission by Demond Melancon.

Big Chief Demond Melancon sewing an elaborate beaded apron, 2016. Photo reprinted with permission by Demond Melancon.

Appendix 6

Page 27:

Mande Wasulanke Masquerade Dancers of Mali. Photo re-printed with permission of Dr. Lucy Duran.
APPENDIX 1

Name: Robin Williams
Company: Nolaworld Musić and Artwerks
Date: December 20, 2017

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Staff Assistant, THNOC: Rebecca Smith

402371, Revised 5/5/11
PHOTOS:
APPENDIX 2

To: Robin Williams
Cc/Bcc, From: OSimage@hotmail.com

Subject: Re: PLEASE FILL OUT THE RELEASE AND SEND BACK TO ME AS SOON AS POSSIBLE! Thanks so very much :-)

I, A. Walker Shaw, do hereby grant my permission to publish my image in the manner prescribed below.
A. Walker Shaw

Sent from my iPad

On Dec 8, 2017, at 1:30 AM, Robin Williams <nolaworldmusic@yahoo.com> wrote:

NOLAWORLD MUSIC & ARTWERKS PUBLISHING

Permission to Use Photograph(s)
Subject: Use of photographs for publications
Publications: THESIS & BOOK

Self-Published Book X “Rhythm, Ritual & Resistance: Africa is Alive Inside the Black Indians of New Orleans”
Number of Total Pages: 160

Description:
African cultural retention lies at the core of the origin of the Black Indian masking tradition of New Orleans. Prior research from progenitor in anthropology and ethnomusicology, focusing on African cultural retention, include the groundbreaking ethnographies of Robert Farris Thompson, Gwendolyn Mollo Hall, Michael F. Smith, Margaret Thompson Drewel, Stephen Webbmyer, Jason Berry and others, have established a solid foundation for research on African influences and retentions in expressive folk cultures, laying a firm foundation for this project.

The author’s insider experiences within the Black Indian tradition are underscored by several field interviews conducted with Chieft and tribal members, culture bearers, elders, curators and spiritualists. Through correlative research findings and examples relating African diaspora dance, music and regalia to the Black Indian tradition, the author has created a cross-cultural history that is based in fact, proving that the story of the Black “Mardi Gras” Indian transcends myth and legend.

The provocative findings of the author throughout research for this project clearly carry a common thread. The phenomenological experiences related by culture bearers in the tradition exhibit an ability for Black Indians to transcend the physical into the spiritual realms during masking, channeling the energy and deeply embedded narrative of their ancestors. As a direct link to African masking, music, spirituality and rituals, maintained after 300 years of cultural retention in America, “masking Indian” is a simultaneously historical and contemporary manifestation of “embodied memory” and cultural resistance, demonstrated through a unique and expressive masquerade ritual.

Photographs:

Inline image
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I have read the above.

Signature

Printed name ___ A. Walker Shaw ____________________

Organization Name (if applicable) ____________________

Address _____ 2111 North Pennsylvania Ave, Indianapolis, IN., 46202-1497 ____________________

Date _____ 29 December, 2017 ____________________
Dec 12 at 9:15 AM
To Robin Williams

Robin,

Hi! Thanks for calling me the other day; it's been a long weekend of holiday photography while dealing with the snow last Friday and three days of power outage (no big deal, fun to occasionally rough it while running a business in the busiest time of the year).

Just seeing your email, and I acknowledge your request.

This is an image created with film, and I launched an all-out search two years ago for my 2015 exhibit at Hammond Regional Arts Center.

I have this image printed as an 8x10, matted and framed, and I will remove it from the frame for scanning - this needs to happen anyhow, as it is an amazing image of Victor Harris and his drummer (forgot his name but I have it somewhere). We will need to acknowledge them both; this drummer has been masking with Big Chief Victor Harris for decades.

Might also negotiate with you for a copy of the book when it becomes available, as well.

What is my deadline on this image?

Sincerely,

Phillip Colwart, Craftsman Photographer Certified Professional Photographer Hammond, LA www.phillipcolwart.com 985.542.8216

On Friday, December 8, 2017 1:12 AM, Robin Williams <nolaworldmusic@yahoo.com> wrote:

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Publications: THESIS


Number of Total Pages: 120
NOLAWORLD MUSIC & ARTWERKS PUBLISHING

Permission to Use Photograph(s)

Subject: Use of photographs for publications

Publications: THESIS & BOOK


Self-Published Book X “Rhythm, Ritual & Resistance: Africa is Alive Inside the Black Indians of New Orleans”

Number of Total Pages: 150

Photographs:

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X Signed.
Dec 7th, 6:11pm

Robin

I am reaching out to you because I am getting ready to publish my thesis "African Cultural Retention in the Development of the Black Indians of New Orleans" in book form in the next few months. I have used/credited one of your photos in my thesis, but now need to gain formal permission from you to use in the published works. Do you have a standard release? I am self-publishing the book.

Robin

These are the photos:

Go ahead…You Know I Love That
Re: LUCY DURAN PHOTO PERMISSION?

On 19 December 2017 at 4:22 PM

To: Robin Williams

ok, go ahead and use the photo!

On 19 December 2017 at 21:20, Robin Williams <nolaworldmusic@yahoo.com> wrote:

Dr. Duran.....please see below...... I am attempting to do this on mobile because I am out mailing Christmas packages, so maybe didn’t receive the last edited version ? All is well! 😊

Thanks again,

Robin

In searching for comparative African examples, some of Big Chief Harris’ regalia is reminiscent of Nigerian egungun masquerade, as well as the Mande wasulu masquerade in Mali, West Africa. In Lucy Duran’s article “Birds of Wasulu: Freedom of Expression and
Expressions of Freedom in the Popular Music of Southern Mali,” the author describes the rich masquerade and music traditions called *sogoninkun*, which feature unique rhythms and singing styles (*sogoninkun*-foly). *Sogoninkun* ("the little antelope head") is the most prevalent masquerade of the Wasulunke and the southern Bamana, originating in Wasulu. In Mande traditions from the Wasulu region, birds are a powerful metaphor “symbols of wisdom, the human spirit, and all forms of singing.” (Duran,109)