"Nobody ain't never gonna find the code," Big Chief Larry Bannock once defiantly argued about the secrets of the Mardi Gras Indians.\(^1\) Famously described by Henry Rightor in 1900 as bands running along the streets on Fat Tuesday "whooping, leaping, brandishing their weapons and, anon, stopping in the middle of a street to go through the movements of a mimic war-dance, chanting the while in rhythmic cadence an outlandish jargon," the Mardi Gras Indians' performances are, indeed, among the most enigmatic traditions of New Orleans's annual carnival celebration.\(^2\) Due to the lack of historical sources, it is tempting to relate these "black Indians" to Buffalo Bill's touring Wild West shows. Although I do not wish to deny that these late

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\(^2\)Henry Rightor, ed., *Standard History of New Orleans, Louisiana: Giving a Description of the Natural Advantages . . .* (Chicago, 1900), 643.
nineteenth-century shows have been part of the stream of influences that shaped the Mardi Gras Indians, the fact that similar traditions developed in places where Buffalo Bill's shows were never performed makes it more likely that New Orleans's "black Indians" represent a specific variant of a broader phenomenon rather than a uniquely Louisianian product. In fact, Léon Beauvallet observed in Cuba in 1856 how some blacks in a parade in honor of a king "had transformed themselves into South American savages, Red Skins, or Apaches," and in his description of a carnival celebration in Trinidad in 1847, Charles Day noticed that some black "Spanish peons from the Main . . . daubed with red ochre" had been brought over to the island from Venezuela to participate in the parade as Indian warrior bands with stick fighters, kings, queens, chiefs, medicine men, ambassadors, and other dignitaries.3

One way of approaching the existing scholarship with new theories despite the paucity of historical sources is by using a comparative perspective. Barbara Bridges, Samuel Kinser, Michael P. Smith, Ned Sublette, and others have broken new ground in the analysis of the Mardi Gras Indians by making connections to a series of Caribbean traditions.4 This article owes much to their pioneering work but tries to make further progress by adding new research materials from Brazil to the analysis. The first three sections serve to highlight parallels between New Orleans's "black Indians" and the many variants of dances, parades, and paratheatrical performances known in Brazil as Mouros e Cristãos (Moors and Christians). In section four, it is argued that this connection does not represent a singular case but rather a broader pattern that may also apply to New Orleans.


This claim is supported by three theories—each corresponding to a different "transformation" of St. James—that could explain the remarkable parallels between Louisiana's Mardi Gras Indians and Brazil's *Moors and Christians*.

Because the Iberian colonial expansion took place in the immediate aftermath of the *Reconquista*, relics of the fierce battle for control over the Iberian Peninsula can be found all over the Americas. One example is Fort St. Ferdinand, the originally French fort in New Orleans that was rebuilt during the Spanish era and renamed after Ferdinand III of Castile (1199-1258), who had been canonized as the "conqueror of Andalusia" in 1671. After the city authorities had demolished Fort St. Ferdinand in 1804, the large open space came to be used by slaves on Sundays. Originally designated as Place Publique or Place du Cirque, during the antebellum period it became known as Congo Square. This popular name corresponded to a type of dances that could regularly be observed on the site: Congo dances.

Writing about New Orleans in 1823, Timothy Flint offered the following description of a Congo dance:

Some hundred of negroes, male and female, follow the king of the wake, who is conspicuous for his youth, size, the whiteness of his eyes, and the blackness of his visage. For a crown he has a series of oblong, gilt-paper boxes on his head, tapering upwards, like a pyramid. From the ends of these boxes hang two huge tassels, like those on epaulets. He wags his head and makes grimaces. By his thousand mountebank tricks, and contortions of countenance and form, he produces an irresistible effect upon the multitude. All the characters that follow him, of leading estimation, have their own peculiar dress, and their own con-

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5 The "reconquest" or recapturing of the Iberian Peninsula from the Islamic kingdoms began in 722 with Pelagius's victory over the Moors in the Battle of Covadonga and was completed in 1492 with the annexation of the Emirate of Granada under the "Catholic monarchs" Ferdinand and Isabella. See Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia, Penn., 2003).
tortions. They dance, and their streamers fly, and the bells that they have hung about them tinkle.

Flint also mentioned how Native Americans joined in and reveled with blacks through the streets: "I have seen groups of these moody and silent sons of the forest, following these merry bacchanalians in their dance, through the streets, scarcely relaxing their grim visages to a smile, in the view of antics that convulsed even the masters of the negroes with laughter."6 While it is unknown whether these "silent sons of the forest" were truly Native Americans or rather blacks in Amerindian attire, the behavior of the group is remarkably similar to that of the Mardi Gras Indians today. Some ten years after Flint, in 1836, Edward Durell used quotation marks in his description of a similar phenomenon consisting of a "well dressed company of 'Native American' militia."7 These references support the assumption by Samuel Kinser that the dances of the Mardi Gras Indians were "long in gestation" and by Reid Mitchell that the tradition "must have been cultivated within the black community long before."8

If the performances of the Mardi Gras Indians do indeed build on a long tradition, it seems likely that they developed out of the dances at Congo Square. In view of the parallels to dances in Haiti, Paul Lachance concluded that the Congo dance described by Flint must have been of Central African origin and that it reflected the strong influence of the thousands of slaves and free persons of color with roots in Central Africa who had come to New Orleans directly from Saint-Domingue (Haiti) or via Cuba in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.9

7Edward H. Durell, New Orleans as I Found It (New York, 1845), 35.
Parallels to Congo dances elsewhere in the Americas could also be mentioned. Consider, for instance, the similarities between Flint's description and Joel Munsell's recollections of Congo dances during the annual Pinkster festival in Albany, New York:

Pinkster was a great day, a gala day, or rather week, for they used to keep it up a week among the darkies. The dances were the original Congo dances as danced in their native Africa. They had a chief, old King Charley. . . . On these festivals old Charley was dressed in a strange and fantastic costume; he was nearly barelegged, wore a red military coat trimmed profusely with variegated ribbons, and a small black hat with a pompon stuck on one side.10

These parallels may not be a coincidence. Parades and dances in which African royalty was honored have been observed all over the Americas, from New England all the way to Argentina.

The Brazilian historian Marina de Mello e Souza extensively documented the importance of lay brotherhoods and confraternities in understanding the development of king elections and celebrations by slave communities on the Iberian Peninsula and in the Latin American diaspora. These brotherhoods were dedicated to a Catholic saint or to the Virgin Mary and functioned as mutual-aid societies. In places with a large amount of slaves, black brotherhoods were usually subdivided in ethnic groups according to the slaves' "nations," i.e. the places in Africa from where they had been shipped. Although all brotherhoods had their singularities and underwent considerable changes in the course of their existence, they shared some characteristics. They possessed a hierarchal structure, in which European aristocratic titles were used. This strict hierarchy, however, was accompanied by a democratic process of decision making. For instance, Chapter XXVI of the 1565 charter

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of the black brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary in Lisbon stipulated that members wishing to be designated as duke, marquis, prince, count, or king had to submit their request to an electoral commission.\(^1\)

Some scholars have argued that these brotherhoods essentially served colonial interests by having blacks accept the rules and standards of a society that repressed them.\(^2\) However, it should be stressed that the desire to create a brotherhood came from within the black community itself. This is not surprising since brotherhoods allowed black solidarity to strengthen, enabled the maintenance or construction of a collective identity, provided a mutual-aid system in order to care for the needy, and permitted the securing of a minimal social mobility that, in exceptional cases, could lead to freedom. The collection of money to liberate brothers and sisters from the bonds of slavery was, in fact, one of the main goals of black brotherhoods. Moreover, these brotherhoods functioned as a means of cultural affirmation as they provided blacks with a chance to have their own chapel or sometimes even entire church and to make sure that its members received an honorable funeral and a decent burial place.

Catholic holidays provided black brotherhoods with an opportunity to organize their own festivities that served as an important source of income. These feasts also provided an opportunity to honor the "king" and other persons within the brotherhood whom slaves elected as their community leaders in the diaspora. King elections and celebrations primarily occurred on holidays that were intimately related to the black community, such as the day of the (black) Sicilian St. Benedict, *il Moro*, and the day of Our Lady of the Rosary. Other important holidays were Epiphany, Pentecost, and Corpus Christi.

Celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christi festivities included a series of decorative and spectacular elements such as people carrying statues of the Virgin Mary, girls

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\(^1\)Marina de Mello E Souza, *Reis Negros No Brasil Escravista. História da Festa de Coroação de Rei Congo* (Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 2002), 209.

\(^2\)Julita Scarano, "Black Brotherhoods: Integration or Contradiction?" *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 16 (1979): 1-17.
decorated with flowers, wagons with *tableaux vivants* (representing, for instance, the combat between David and Goliath, the battle between angels and devils, or St. George and the dragon), musicians, a "fat ox," men riding hobbyhorses, men disguised as savages, sword dancers, gypsy dancers, stilt-walkers, giants, dwarfs with enormous heads of papier-mâché, and fireworks. The celebration of Corpus Christi required the inclusion of the entire Christian population, hence also that of (baptized) slaves. According to José Tinhorão, the Portuguese ecclesiastical authorities did not consider it appropriate to allow the figuration of slaves during Corpus Christi processions and found a solution by having slaves performing the "nation" of Afonso I (c. 1456-c. 1542), the founding father of the Afro-Catholic Kingdom of Kongo. By Africanizing Catholicism, Afonso I had created a variant of Catholicism that represented the perfect mixture of African pride and European Christianity for black brotherhoods.

Since the late fourteenth century, the performance of a mock fight between Moors and Christians had also become part of Corpus Christi celebrations on the Iberian Peninsula. Although this tradition might have been inspired by older European (or perhaps Moorish) dramatizations of mock combats, sword dances, and games of canes, it is generally assumed that *Moors and Christians*, known in Spanish as *Moros y Cristianos* and in Portuguese as *Mouros e Cristãos*, originated on the Iberian Peninsula in the context of the *Reconquista*. Due to this connection, the performance traditionally honored St. James the Greater (Santiago/São Tiago), the "Moor-slayer" (Matamoros/-Matamouros), who according to legend had miraculously appeared in support of the Christian army during the battle of


Clavijo in 844 and had therefore become adopted as the patron saint of Christian soldiers.\textsuperscript{15}

Soon, this performance became popular in other parts of Europe. Already in 1389, a mock battle between Christians and Moors was performed when Queen Isabella of France made a ceremonial entry into Paris.\textsuperscript{16} John Forrest assumes that a later tradition known in Spanish as \textit{Moresca} (and translated in other languages as \textit{Morris Dance}, \textit{Danse Mourisque}, and \textit{Moriskentanz}) became stripped of narrative drama and instead emphasized pure dance. Among the basic characteristics of the \textit{Moresca}, Forrest mentions high leaping, mock fighting with sticks, mimed action, dancing in a circle, and rhythmic stepping. Dancers typically wore gilt paper helmets, long streamers tied to their shoulders, and bells to their legs. In the sixteenth century, these dances became integrated in popular urban street performances as part of midsummer guild processions, May games, mumming plays, and Lord of Misrule processions that featured a mock king with knights on hobby horses. An interesting characteristic of the \textit{Moresca} outside the Iberian Peninsula is the habit of using blackface when representing Moors, a tradition that continues up to the present day in so-called "Border Morris gangs" performing along the Welsh-English border. By the late sixteenth century, \textit{Moresca} evolved into \textit{masques}, festive courtly entertainments of which John Milton's \textit{Comus} is the best-known example.\textsuperscript{17}

On the Iberian Peninsula, \textit{Moors and Christians} developed into spectacular performances that made use of elaborate settings, including castles, cavalries, and fleets. These performances were

\textsuperscript{15}Michael J. Doudoroff, ed., \textit{Moros y Cristianos in Zacatecas: Text of a Mexican Folk Play} (Lawrence, Kan., 1981), vii. Despite its origin in a history of violence and its emphasis on conversion, Harris has argued that the central message of the tradition should be understood as one of \textit{convivencia} (peaceful coexistence) rather than one of submission. Max Harris, \textit{Aztecs, Moors, and Christians: Festivals of Reconquest in Mexico and Spain} (Austin, Tex., 2000), 63,


\textsuperscript{17}John Forrest, \textit{The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750} (Toronto, Can., 1999), 7, 74, 92, 99, 101, 113.
inspired by Carolingian literature and often featured Charlemagne, the *Rex Christianissimus* of the *Imperium Christianum*, and his select group of knights, the Twelve Peers. In the context of these mock fights, the dancers use swords, cudgels, or sticks and are called soldiers. Modeled after Iberian medieval armies and courtly traditions, each "embassy" displays a strong hierarchy and includes a captain, spy, flag-bearer, king and queen, page, and buffoon. *Moors and Christians* traditionally begins with a parade of the respective embassies. When the Moors (traditionally dressed in red, with capes and hats covered with plumes and displaying crescents, "oriental" gemstones, crossed scimitars, snakes, and other Islamic symbols) are confronted by the Christians (traditionally dressed in blue), the Christian chief demands the Moorish chief to surrender. After a heated discussion, a mock fight sets in whereby the Moors initially seem to obtain victory but are eventually defeated and forced to bow in order to be baptized as Christians.18

In the context of the Iberian colonial expansion, these performances were exported to the colonies. As early as 1539, friars in the Mexican city of Tlaxcalteca staged a conquest of Jerusalem that involved some fifteen hundred actors during Corpus Christi festivities, and only one year after the Christian victory in Lepanto in 1571, the ecclesiastic authorities in Mexico City organized a mock fight between Christians and Turks involving a fleet during the feast day of St. James.19

The export of this cultural performance to other continents indicates how strongly the Iberian colonial expansion was initially perceived as a continuation of the *Reconquista*. In the early decades of America's colonial history, the Iberian elite distinguished itself from the indigenous population by its membership in chivalric orders such as the Order of Calatrava, the Order of Christ, and the Order of Santiago that had their origins in the crusades and the *Reconquista*. In the context of


these orders, St. James enjoyed tremendous popularity. Not by accident, the celebration of "Santiago Matamoros" was established as the principal holiday of Mexico City in 1541, whereas the city authorities of Santiago de Cuba annually organized elaborate festivities in honor of St. James on the 25th of July.  

As confirmed by Michael Doudoroff, "the moros y cristianos . . . has probably involved the direct participation of more people than any other folk play; and it has evidently served as an important vehicle for the expression of some deeply-held cultural values." Considering this popularity, it is no surprise that the tradition also influenced slave communities with roots in Africa.

The influence of Moors and Christians on cultural performances by slaves in the American diaspora is notorious in the case of Brazil. According to Camera Cascudo, Congo dances in Brazil, known as congadas, congados, or (autos dos) Congos, use a basic structure with a parade, meeting of the enemies, heated discussion, mock fight, and bowing of the defeated group and a color combination—blue for Christians, red for pagans—that parallels that of Moors and Christians, but they usually perform an African variant of the battle, whereby the Christian forces are led by the King of Kongo. In fact, as Silvia Lara argues, "the embassies and parades of the Kings and Queens of Kongo should be understood in connection with the performances that developed out of the victory over the Moors during the Reconquista." According to Marlyse Meyer, the King of Kongo

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20Niomar de Souza Pereira, Cavalhadas no Brasil: de cortejo a cavalo a lutas de mouros e Cristãos (São Paulo, Brazil, 1983), 18-9.
21Doudoroff, Moros y Cristianos in Zacatecas, vi.
22Luís da Camara Cascudo, Dicionário do folclore brasileiro (São Paulo, Brazil, 1979), 244.
23Silvia H. Lara, "Significados cruzados: um reinado de Congos na Bahia setecentista", in Maria C. Pereira Cunha, ed., Carnavais e outras fbrvnestas: Ensaios de história social da cultura (Campinas, Brazil, 2002), 81. All translations are by the author.
transformed into an African variant of Charlemagne in the context of the merger of African and Carolingian elements in congadas.²⁴

Among the many variants of congadas that developed in Brazil, there are some in which blacks dress up like Native Americans. In a description of a congada dating from 1748, the dancers were said to wear "headdresses made of long plumes," and in 1843, a witness at a king election ceremony of a brotherhood composed by slaves with roots in Kongo mentioned that the "warriors or ambassadors . . . dressed up in the style of Brazilian Indians."²⁵ Cascudo confirms that "in Brazil, the Amerindian element converged, here and there, into Congo dances," which is the case of maracatus that integrate black dancers dressed as feathered Native Americans.²⁶ Maracatus developed out of king parades, which explains why the sun umbrella, a traditional element to highlight the king's prestige during parades, became an important element in these dances.

Another example of this convergence is the cucumbi, where the rei negro (black king) confronts the caboclo, a Brazilian term used to refer to a person of mixed Native American and European ancestry or to Native Americans in general. The composition of each group (with a king, ambassador, spy, and flag-bearer) as well as the color combinations are similar to that of the groups performing battles between Moors and Christians. Members of the caboclo group dress up as Native Americans, with elaborate feathered and beaded costumes. They use small sticks, tomahawks or bows and arrows as weapons. Although the overall structure of the performance corresponds to that of Moors and Christians (parade, meeting of the enemies, heated discussion, mock fight, bowing of the defeated group), the plot is different. In cucumbis, the Amerindians attack the group of the African king and kill his son (mameto). Informed about the death of her son by the interpreter (língua), the queen (rainha) asks the medicine

²⁴Meyer, De Carlos Magno e outras histórias, 55.
²⁵Quoted in Elizabeth W. Kiddy, Blacks of the Rosary: Memory and History in Minas Gerais, Brazil (University Park, Penn., 2005), 131, 160.
²⁶Cascudo, Dicionário do folclore brasileiro, 243-44.
man (quimboto) to resurrect him and to kill the caboclo. Upon being resurrected, the caboclo tries to kill the mameto for a second time, which leads to a battle that is lost by the caboclos. The drama ends with joint prayers to the Virgin Mary.27

Cucumbis have several characteristics in common with caboclinhos, mock war dances without dialogue whereby all dancers are dressed as Native Americans. In caboclinhos, each tribe (tribo) is led by a king (rei) or big chief (cacique) and also includes a pennant-bearer (porta-estandartes), captain (capitão), lieutenant (tenente), guide (guia) and vice-guide (contra-guia), dwarfs (perós or Indiozinhos), a medicine man (pajé or curandeiro), and a queen (rainha). After a prayer in the local church, they run through the streets, and when one group meets another group a (mock) fight can erupt. These encounters can become violent if the banner of one of the groups is touched by a member of a rival group.28 A spectacular variant is that of rural Pernambuco, where the caboclos de lança use colorful headwear and wear belts with several bells. Caboclos are also part of popular theater performances known as bumba-meu-boi in the northern state of Maranhão, where characters known as rajados or caboclos de fita use feathered headwear that in size even exceeds that of New Orleans's Mardi Gras Indians.29

27Ibid., 266-67. A variant of this tradition is performed by "Wild Indians" on the island of Trinidad, where the adversary claims the king's son as a hostage, after which the queen performs a long lament for her son, followed by a spirited plea for his release. Thereupon, a spectator throws a coin and hits the indigenous chief who falls down as if mortally wounded. His fellow tribesmen gather around and revive him by beating their rosaries. Errol Hill, The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre (Austin, Tex., 1972), 39. One of the oldest references to performances of "black Indians" in Trinidad refers to "Spanish morris-dancers in beautiful costume, representing Indian caciques." Helene Bellour and Samuel Kinser, "Amerindian Masking in Trinidad's Carnival: The House of Black Elk in San Fernando," The Drama Review, 42 (Autumn 1998): 150.

28On the potentially violent reaction when touching the flag of an "Indian gang" in New Orleans, see Richard B. Turner, Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans (Bloomington, Ind., 2009), 56.

29Cascudo, Dicionário do folclore brasileiro, 150-54, 166-67.
Some of these Afro-Brazilian dances with Native American elements became integrated in carnival parades. The Rio de Janeiro carnival, as it was introduced by the city's bourgeoisie in 1840 (the first Carnival ball) and 1855 (the first Carnival parade), was modeled after the Parisian carnival. It was intended to do away with popular celebrations of carnival or *entrudo*, as it used to be called, that either had their origin in European pre-Lenten festivities introduced by Portuguese settlers or in Afro-Brazilian festivities such as *congadas* and *cucumbis* that had developed in the context of black brotherhoods. The massive participation of black brotherhoods at an event that was not a religious holiday requiring a procession relates to the fact that the brotherhoods felt threatened by this initiative of the city's elite and wanted to "show presence" in "their" neighborhoods. The attempt by the elite to impose a "civilized" carnival failed, however, as both white and black popular celebrations continued to be performed, which led to an amalgam of traditions. When the elite realized that its attempt to destroy popular festivities had failed, it switched its strategy to the incorporation of popular elements in the "official" carnival, albeit in an "orderly" form. By the 1870s, *congadas* and *cucumbis* (with their kings, embassies, pennants, flag-bearers, masters of ceremony, and warriors) became absorbed in carnival celebrations under the name *cordões* (ribbons), the later samba schools. This absorption of popular celebrations in Rio's carnival triggered the interest of composer Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959), who in the 1920s introduced African elements in his music, thereby laying the basis of *bossa nova*, Brazilian jazz.30

The similarities between Louisiana's Mardi Gras Indians and the Afro-Brazilian syncretic variants of *Moors and Christians*—the military organization of the groups, the strict hierarchy, the presence of a spy boy, flag boy, and medicine man, the importance of the banner, the twirling of umbrellas, the

Amerindian-type headwear of the dancers, and the *modus operandi* of the performance (parade, meeting of the enemies, heated discussion, mock fight, bowing of the defeated group)—are overwhelming.

While traditional interpretations hardly succeeded in making any sense of this performance, interpreting the behavior of Mardi Gras Indians in connection with *Moors and Christians* clarifies much of the scenery. Moreover, references in Mardi Gras songs to the color red for Amerindians (in songs such as *Indian Red*) to the crescent (in *My Gang Got Ready by the Light of the Moon*) to kings or emperors (in *My Big Chief Got a Golden Crown*) to kneeling (*We won't kneel down*) and the tradition to recite the Our Father on Mardi Gras mornings become much clearer in light of this connection. The Afro-Catholic roots of the tradition could also clarify why the "Indians" suddenly reappear on Super Sunday, around St. Joseph's Day. This reappearance corresponds to the Catholic tradition to conclude the Carnival season on Laetare Sunday, a day of relaxation in the middle of Lent. As "feast of light" Laetare was traditionally celebrated with festive night processions with lanterns, similar to how Big Chief Harrison recorded St. Joseph's night parades in New Orleans.31

Similarities in the characteristics of dances typically associated with *Moors and Christians* and dances of Louisiana's black community are not just of recent date but go back to the earliest descriptions. In 1817, for instance, the Swiss traveler Johann Ulrich Buechler, writing about the "plays that the Negroes every Sunday evening at 4 P.M. perform on a large square," mentioned that the male dancers "dress themselves in oriental and Indian dress with a Turkish turban in different colors." In 1819, Benjamin Latrobe observed how women danced holding "each a coarse handkerchief extended by the corner in their hands." Theodore Pavie noted that upon the command to dance "the dance of the Congos," a group of enslaved men performed a dance "with nearly militaristic movements." Pierre Forest observed in 1831 that the dance he witnessed on Congo Square was "rather a

pantomime than a dance." And both Flint in the early 1820s and Lafcadio Hearn in 1883 mentioned how dancers leaped and had bells or tin rattles fastened on their ankles. These are all typical characteristics of *Moresca* dances that developed out of Iberian *Moors and Christians*.

These parallels indicate that there may be a connection between "black Indians" and the dances, parades, and paratheatrical performances of *Moors and Christians*, as observed in Brazil. In the following sections, three different theories are presented to explain this possible connection.

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Roger Abrahams assumes that the conspicuous parallels between European mumming plays and certain black performances in the American diaspora relate to slave overseers of rural European origin or to European peasant groups who lived and worked with or near slaves in the Americas. European children's literature has also been mentioned as a source of inspiration. In 1875, the *Nassau Guardian* suggested that cultural performances of the black community on the Bahamas had been inspired by white schoolchildren performing mummers plays, and the annual performance of a dramatic fight between Christians and Moors by the black population of St. Kitts has been explained with reference to Juliana Horatia Ewing's children's story about mumming.

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The adoption of certain European performances by slaves in the American diaspora is a common phenomenon and has also been observed in New Orleans. In 1808, for instance, Pierre Laussat mentioned in his Memoirs that on Ash Wednesday some blacks danced bamboulas while others danced the rustic European contre-danses (quadrilles), which at the time were popular in white public ballrooms. It is, as such, possible that the Mardi Gras Indians' performances originated when slaves began to imitate a tradition that had been introduced in New Orleans by European settlers.

The traditional presence of the "wild man" in Indian gangs can serve as the point of departure to explore this theory. "Wild men" also play an important role in European folklore. In the Flemish city of Dendermonde, for instance, the medieval guild of the pijnders that had the monopoly in transporting wine and beer used to organize charivari with a band playing tin-kettling music that was followed by a group of "wild men" covered in feathers who performed a mock battle with cudgels. This parade was a form of hazing, whereby those willing to join the "civilized guild" first had to go through a ritual that required them to act like savages. "Wild men" also prominently figured in other European rituals that related to moments of transition, most notably the celebration of rebirth in spring.

In the context of Corpus Christi and other Christian celebrations, "wild men" merged with (sometimes blackfaced) Moresca dancers, devils, and jesters. An example of such a syncretic tradition with roots in Corpus Christi festivities is the bugiada. It is annually celebrated in the Portuguese town Sobrado and was witnessed in the 1930s by Rodney Gallop:

(Seattle, Wash., 1988), 56, 81; Orlando Inoa, Los Cocolos en la Sociedad Dominicana (Santo Domingo, 2005), 90-1.

34Kinser, Carnival, American Style, 40.


36Very, The Spanish Corpus Christi Procession, 21, 28, 39, 44, 82-3, 91, 95-6, 99.
With drawn swords to the hilts of which were knotted clean white handkerchiefs the *Mouriscos* were dancing in the trellised courtyard of the priest’s house. . . . On their heads they wore cardboard shakos a foot high, hung with little mirrors and gold braid, and surmounted with red plumes. Drawn up in two lines, with grave unsmilng faces, they were dancing in their places, while their king, distinguished by gold chains and epaulettes, skipped from one end of the line to the other, dancing in turn with different pairs of them. A comic figure in blue overalls with a mask made of cork bark followed him outside the rank aping all his movements. . . . When this dance was done . . . they were met by a mob of figures clad even more incongruously than themselves. The *Bugios* . . . were all masked, a few with animal faces, and on their heads they wore cavalier hats adorned with paper ribbons and culminating in a cascade of paper streamers. . . . With wild gestures and uncouth cries they rushed into the courtyard and began to dance, drawn up like their predecessors in a double line. The king of the *Bugios* . . . appeared to give them secret and nefarious orders.37

The fact that this description is somewhat reminiscent of Flint's account of New Orleans's Congo Square might not be a coincidence. Felipe Ferreira, one of Brazil's leading experts on the history of carnival, is convinced that the inclusion of black men dressed as Native Americans during Brazilian carnival relates to European "wild men."

According to Ferreira, the transformation of "wild men" into Native Americans in the context of *Moresca* can be explained by Europe's fascination for "savages" following the discovery of America. As an example, he quotes the case of the Belgian city of Binche, where at the occasion of Charles V's visit to the palace of his aunt Mary of Hungary in 1549 a mock battle was organized between "civilized" Europeans and "wild men" wearing feathered headwear. "Wild men" are traditionally also present in today's local carnival parades under the Spanish name *Gilles*. So, according to Ferreira, just like during carnival parades in Binche white men dress up as Amerindians with gigantic feathered hats,

in Rio de Janeiro and Recife black men dress up as Native Americans in *caboclinhos* and *maracatus*. Hence the combination of African dances, Iberian folklore, and Amerindian fantasy outfits.38

Ferreira's theory is worth exploring. Historical evidence does, in fact, confirm a merger of "wild men" and Native American elements in sixteenth-century performance culture. In 1525, for instance, the organizers of the festivities of the Assumption of the Virgin in Toledo hired fourteen white actors, of which four had to dress like "wild men," four like Africans, four like "Amazons," one like an African king, and one like an "Amazon queen." In 1539, Barnal Díaz describes how a "Battle of the Wild Men and the Blacks" was performed in Mexico City, whereby a group of sumptuously dressed black men and women escorted their king and queen and then engaged in a mock fight with Native American "savages," which was followed the next day by a performance of *Moros y Cristianos*.

There are also notorious parallels between descriptions of dancers at Congo Square and those of black dancers performing diablitos (wild little devils) in Cuban *Día de Reyes* (Epiphany) parades. In 1859, Ontiano Lorcas mentioned that some diablitos dressed "like Indians with feathers, bells, and necklaces" while other sources observed how certain blacks were wearing "huge hats of feathers" and even "castles of feathers."39

Considering this mixture of traditions, it is not surprising to find a depiction of a *Boeuf Gras* parade in Paris in 1852 showing one character dressed as a Moor, clearly visible by his turban displaying a half moon, and others dressed as Native American "savages."40 As the Parisian Carnival served as inspiration for New Orleans's Mardi Gras parades, one could assume that

38Felipe Ferreira, *O livro de ouro do carnaval brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2004), 291-94.


40Kinser, *Carnival, American Style*, 155-56.
certain elements related to the Moresca ended up in Louisiana, where they were adopted and further developed by the black population.

There is plenty of evidence that elements related to the Moresca were, in fact, part of New Orleans's Mardi Gras parades since the very beginning. The earliest references to informal Mardi Gras parades in the 1830s mention the inclusion of "heathens and Christians," and in 1859, when the motif of the parade was English folklore, Morris dances were performed. These connections increased in the context of the "official" Mardi Gras carnival, most notably in the choice of the name Comus by the first mystic krewe but also in the decision by the king of Rex in 1873 to dress as a crusader surrounded by Mamluk soldiers, to present himself in 1877 as Charlemagne attended by his Twelve Peers, and to have a person in Muslim dress pulling the Fat Ox float in 1899. The observation by Kinser that the Mobile and New Orleans carnivals are characterized by a "pseudo-knightly bravado," as reflected in the role of the Captain who rides in front of the krewe's floats and is dressed like a conqueror, reinforces the assumption of a possible connection between the Mardi Gras Indians and the dramas and dances that developed out of the Iberian Reconquista.

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However, despite parallels to European "wild men," there are strong indications that the Mardi Gras Indians may have roots in Central Africa. Consider, for instance, the following anecdote: When Katharine Dunham visited Haiti in 1936 she reported to have seen Mardi Gras bands of dancers that were organized in ways parallel to those of New Orleans "black Indians." According to Dunham, the bands grouped themselves around a major-domo wearing a large headdress of paper flowers, mirrors, and ostrich plumes. The word major-domo, which Kinser mistakenly assumed

41 For wild men and Mardi Gras, see ibid., 151-94.
42 Mitchell, All on a Mardi Gras Day, 22-5; Kinser, Carnival, American Style, 151.
to be a reference to the baton the man was holding, is derived from the Spanish *mayor-domo* or Portuguese *mordomo* and refers to the administrator of a Catholic brotherhood.43

Historical evidence indicates that this connection between Catholic brotherhoods and "black Indians" might not be a coincidence. As Linda Heywood and John Thornton have argued, little attention has traditionally been given in U. S.-American scholarship to the fact that a significant percentage of Central Africans who left the region as slaves identified themselves as Catholics. While it was long assumed that the Portuguese missionary impact in the region had been superficial and affected only upper class circles, Heywood and Thornton have convincingly demonstrated that by the end of the sixteenth century even people in rural parts of the Kingdom of Kongo had come to accept the principal rituals and symbols of Catholicism and that, eventually, Catholicism became the main source of Kongoese identity.44

There is a growing consensus in contemporary academic scholarship that historians in previous decades not only underestimated this impact but, as Terry Rey argues, even displayed a tendency to "unwittingly de-Catholicize seventeenth and eighteenth-century Kongoese religious culture in the New World." In fact, recent studies on Haitian Vodou indicate that many slaves in St. Domingue remained attached to the Catholic practices they had brought with them from Africa and that the roots of Vodou are to be found in Kongoese Catholicism.45

If applied to Louisiana, it seems that scholars have been inclined to give too much importance to the role of the Capuchins, the Ursuline nuns, and their affiliated confraternity of Children


of Mary in spreading Catholicism among the slave population.\textsuperscript{46} Their remarkably successful baptismal records may, in fact, relate to the fact that many of these slaves already identified themselves as Catholics before their arrival in Louisiana. It is even possible that ever since the arrival of a slave ship from Cabinda in the early eighteenth century, New Orleans had an Afro-Catholic community.\textsuperscript{47}

As in Haiti, the borders between Catholicism and Vodou always remained blurred in the New Orleans's Afro-Catholic community. Rather than serving as two different religions, Catholicism and Vodou functioned as the two poles of a religious continuum. As Oscar Felix, a follower of Marie Laveau, pointed out, Vodou ceremonies in New Orleans had much in common with Catholic Masses. Felix also highlighted that after dancing with "metal rings on their knees that would jingle and rattle," members of the Marie Laveau Vodou community used to recite the "Our Father." Interestingly, one of the songs Felix remembered hearing at Congo Square—"Conduit moin la reine, conduit moin dans château le roi"—referred to kings and queens as leaders of Vodou associations. The fact that certain rituals and prayer practices of the Mardi Gras Indians became part of New Orleans's black spiritual churches reinforces the claim of a connection to Afro-Catholic and/or Vodou brotherhoods.

This connection has also been observed elsewhere. When asked in 1976 why he used to perform as a "Wild Indian" in the Jamaican Porto Antonio band, Valentine "Willy" Best answered that he had done so because he was a member of the Ancient Mystical Order of Rosicrucians, dedicated to Our-Lady-of-the-Rosary.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46}Emily Clark, \textit{Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834} (Chapel Hill, 2007), 161-94.

\textsuperscript{47}The charter generation had been formed by slaves brought to New Orleans on twenty-three ships between 1719 and 1731. One of these ships, carrying 294 slaves, came from Cabinda in Central Africa. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, \textit{Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century} (Baton Rouge, La., 1992), 60.

In order to understand Afro-Catholic faith in the New World it should be stressed that the expansion of Catholicism in Central Africa was not so much the result of successful European missionary activities but rather of the decision by the Kongolese monarch Afonso I and his successors to embrace and promote the new faith. As a result, the Kongolese did not perceive Catholicism as a foreign religion but as part of their own identity. Formerly known as Mvemba a Nzinga, Afonso I had defeated his pagan brother in the Battle of Mbanza-Kongo in 1506 and dedicated his victory to St. James the Greater, who allegedly had intervened in the battle. His name Afonso as well as his veneration of St. James symbolically linked the King of Kongo to the Battle of Ourique in 1139, in which the Portuguese King Afonso Henriques had allegedly defeated the Moors thanks to an intervention by St. James. In Kongo, St. James the "Moor-slayer" was thus transformed into St. James the "pagan-slayer." Under the leadership of Afonso I, the Kongolese aristocracy switched to a Portuguese cultural model and formed orders of knighthood for which it adopted Portuguese names, titles, coats of arms, and styles of dress. Following their conversion to Catholicism, churches were built and Catholic holidays were adopted.49

Brotherhoods played a crucial role in the dissemination of Catholicism in the Kingdom of Kongo. After the first black brotherhoods in Africa had been established on the islands of Santiago in 1495 and São Tomé in 1526, the brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary was created in the Kongolese capital São Salvador around 1610. Other brotherhoods, dedicated to the Holy Sacrament, the Holy House of Mercy, the Immaculate Conception, the Holy Spirit, St. Ignatius, and St. Anthony, followed. These brotherhoods did not depend on white priests or missionaries to thrive because an active local laity took their

2011), 56-7, 97; Kinser, Carnival, American Style, 173; Smith, Mardi Gras Indians, 112; Bettelheim, "Jonkonnu and Other Christmas Masquerades," 40.

place. Thanks to these lay ministers, Thornton claims, "Christianity conquered Kongo peacefully—but at the cost of adapting itself almost wholly to the 'conquered' people's conception of religion and cosmology." As the translation of Christian terms into local Kikongo occurred on the basis of words and expressions already rooted in animistic traditions, the borders between animistic beliefs and Catholicism remained blurred. Catholic objects such as crosses, crucifixes, statues of saints, and rosaries were interpreted as new and stronger minkisi—magic complexes that gave protection against evil forces.50

The attachment to such Afro-Catholic objects of worship remained strong among those who were brought as slaves to the Americas. Significantly, a French priest visiting Barbados in 1654 wrote that "if any of them have anything of the Catholic Religion which they received among the Portuguese, they keep it the best they can, doing their prayers and worshipping God in their hearts." Reports also indicate that some Kongolese slaves in the Americas acted as (Afro-) Catholic priests. During his stay on the Danish Virgin Islands in the 1760s, the Moravian missionary worker Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp noted that it was common "primarily by the Negroes from the Congo" to perform "a kind of baptism . . . characterized by pouring water over the head of the baptized, placing some salt in his mouth, and praying over him in the Congo language. . . . Afterwards there is a Negro celebration, provided by the more prosperous of the slaves."

According to Oldendorp, the slaves had learned this baptismal ritual from the Portuguese priests in Africa.51

The main holiday in the Kingdom of Kongo was July 25, St. James's Day. In the context of St. James celebrations, mock war dances called *sangamentos* used to be performed. As Georges Balandier has indicated, this dance was also performed at a time of transition of power. Whenever a new king or regional governor was elected, *sangamentos* were performed as part of the delegation of power.52 An extensive eyewitness description of a *sangamento* has been provided by the Italian Capuchin Giovanni Francesca da Roma:

On these occasions, [the King] is richly dressed and wears a crown of great value on his head, similar to the one worn by emperors. In his left hand, he holds his big shield and in his right hand he holds his unsheathed sword. The nobles are also wearing their richest cloths, and even the soldiers do too, with the exception of those with a naked upper body, which helps them to remain agile with the sword and with the bow and arrow. On their heads, they attach lots of feathers of different colors. With the king in the middle, they start running in a group, holding unsheathed swords in their hands, shouting as if they were planning to loot the city. On the squares, they stop, and from opposite sides of the square some men come forward. . . . [T]hey start fighting and handle their shields, swords, bows and spears with such dexterity and agility that it is a pleasure to watch. They jump now and then, squat, straighten themselves up, and give horrifying looks while they shout and scream. . . . When the ordinary soldiers are finished, some nobles come to the fore, with unsheathed swords in their hands and shields in the left hands. They form a circle around the king, give the most horrifying looks one can imagine and


52The political organization of the Kongo had a repetitive quality, whereby regional governors acted as "replicas" of the king. Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo*, 208, 233.
start screaming "Who dares to offend our king? We here are willing to defend him with our blood and even our life." . . . When this is over, the king jumps to the fore and all together, with the king in their middle, they start running as if they were about to go hunting. . . . To these military reviews they bring several musical instruments: horns, indigenous drums and European drums that were imported from Portugal and the Netherlands.53

While Giovanni da Roma hints at European influence only at the end of his description, the Capuchin Girolamo Merolla da Sorrento argued in his Breve, e succinta relatione del viaggio nel regno di Congo (1692) that sangamentos had two parts: one in which dancers dressed the traditional way and used traditional weapons, followed by a second one where soldiers wore European dress and used European weaponry.54 In his Report of the Kingdom of Congo (1591), based on the writings of Duarte Lopez, Filippo Pigafetta described the Kongolese military dress as "a cap ornamented with cock's, ostrich's, peacock's, and other feathers . . . which makes the men seem taller and very formidable" and "a belt . . . with bells attached to it . . . so arranged that when fighting with their enemies the sounds give them courage."55

The fact that both the Kongolese and the Portuguese happened to honor St. James with a mock war performance is remarkable. Considering the Kongolese fascination for Portuguese traditions, it is possible that these "European-style" sangamentos were influenced by Moors and Christians.56 Sources confirm, in fact, that the Kongolese adopted several elements of Portuguese


54Girolamo Merolla da Sorrenta and Angelo Piccardo, Breve e succinta relatione del viaggio nel regno di Congo nell'Africa meridionale (Naples, 1692), 157-60.


56This influence may have been mutual. The color combination red and blue during Moors and Christians possibly relates to the coat of arms of the King of Kongo. Brásio, Monumenta Missionária Africana, 1:258.
popular culture. A notorious example is music. Since the late fifteenth century, Portuguese musical instruments circulated in the Kingdom of Kongo where they had a strong impact on local performance culture.\textsuperscript{57} Pigafetta mentioned how "pipes and flutes are played with great skill at the king's court, whilst the people dance somewhat in Moorish fashion." In his account on the island of Barbados from 1673, Richard Ligon mentioned how slaves "who have been bred up amongst the Portugals" had extraordinary singing and fencing qualities "with their Stookados, their Imbrocados, and their Passes," which confirms that certain elements of Portuguese popular entertainment were brought to America by African slaves.\textsuperscript{58}

The description of the celebrations in Luanda, Angola, following the canonization of the Jesuit Francis Xavier in 1620 indicates the important role of brotherhoods in the transmission of Portuguese popular culture in Africa:

> The procession began at the main church of the city. . . . In front one could see three giants. . . . [T]he giants were followed by Creoles from São Tomé, who performed their dances . . . and amongst them was their king, before whom they gave speeches, according to their custom. Then the brotherhoods of the city followed . . . all with their respective pennants; then a ship followed that represented how the saint traveled to India. . . . [B]ehind the ship one could see a swordfight that was as well performed as the best one can see in Portugal. . . . [T]hen the sons of the city's dignitaries followed, who were all very talented dancers and who, after several variations, performed a dance with sticks. . . . Behind them a theatre play was performed whereby the King of Kongo welcomed the saint. . . . On the eighth day of the celebrations, a scene from the life of St.

\textsuperscript{57}In the late fifteenth century, the Portuguese King John II sent church bells and a pipe organ to the king of Kongo. In 1584, the Carmelite priest Diogo de Santíssimo Santo mentioned that he had seen various choirs performing Christian hymns and that one choir included a man who could "sing to the organ." Carmen M. Radulet, ed., \textit{O Cronista Rui de Pina e a "Relação do Reino do Congo": Manuscrito inédito do Códice Riccardiano 1910} (Lisbon, Portugal 1992), 105; Brásio, \textit{Monumenta Missionária Africana}, 3:296.

\textsuperscript{58}Hutchinson, \textit{A Report of the Kingdom of Congo}, 112. Ligon is quoted from Abrahams and Szwed, \textit{After Africa}, 61-2.
Francisco Xavier was performed about the time when he was preaching in Malacca and prophesized that the Portuguese would obtain a victory against those from Ache, which involved a great spectacle of war.\textsuperscript{59}

This passage proves that Portuguese mock war spectacles between Christians and Muslims ("those from Ache") were performed in Central Africa at the height of the transatlantic slave trade.

Thornton argues that "if [\textit{sangamento}] dancing passed to America, it might be found in the martial types of dancing that one meets in occasional accounts of stick fighting." While the Brazilian \textit{congada} is probably the most famous example of such a mock war dance with sticks, it should also be mentioned that St. James occupies a prominent role as "Loa de la guerre" (Saint of War) in Haitian Vodou, which might account for the similarities between Kongo royal parades followed by \textit{sangamentos} and Haitian \textit{rara}. In fact, as Elizabeth McAlister confirms, \textit{rara} "recalls and activates religious principles from the African kingdom of Kongo."\textsuperscript{60}

Performances with characteristics similar to \textit{sangamentos} have also been observed in North America. In 1736, an anonymous report by an author calling him- or herself "the Spy" described a mock fight performed by slaves in New York. According to the Spy, a black fraternity called "the Gamesters" commemorated "the Resurrection of our Blessed Saviour" with a festive gathering whereby "several Companies of the Blacks" with "Wariors" (sic) used cudgels and small sticks to act out a type of war dance. In her description of dances in New Orleans and rural Louisiana, Nina Monroe mentioned that "the Calinda was a war-dance in which men alone took part, stripped to the waist and brandish[ing] sticks in a mock fight." In 1836, Edward Henry Durell also observed that those blacks marching along with a

\textsuperscript{59}Alfredo de Albuquerque Felner, \textit{Angola: Apontamentos sôbre a ocupação e início do estabelecimento dos Portugueses no Congo, . . .} (Coimbra, Portugal, 1933), 531-43.

\textsuperscript{60}Elizabeth A. McAlister, \textit{Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora} (Berkeley, Calif., 2002), 4.
"well dressed company of 'Native American' militia . . . played at shuttlecock with their neighbours' heads." Not surprisingly, thus, Samuel Kinser, Reid Mitchell, and Richard Turner all came to the conclusion that the Mardi Gras Indians' behavior is reminiscent to that of stickfighting bands.61 However, none of them made a connection to the Kingdom of Kongo.

One could, in fact, speculate that slaves with roots in Central Africa may have established (secret) associations modeled upon Luso-African brotherhoods in the American diaspora where they elected their "kings" and honored these leaders with parades, dances, and sangamento-type mock war performances. So, when Johann Gottfried Flügel discerned no less than three "richly ornamented" black kings on Congo Square in 1817, he may not have witnessed slaves of noble birth but rather slaves who had been elected as leaders of local brotherhoods. An anonymous report about Congo Square from 1879 indicates that "the Minahs (sic) would not dance near the Congos, nor the Mandringos (sic) near the Gangas," which seems to indicate that—like in Cuba and Brazil—each slave "nation" in New Orleans had its own brotherhood. This corresponds to Pierre Forest's observation in 1831 about Congo Square that "they had gathered in a large number of distinct groups: each has its own flag floating atop a very tall mast, used as rallying point for the group."62

Although no explicit evidence of the existence of black brotherhoods in New Orleans has been found, these associations


were a common phenomenon in Cuba under the name *cabildos de nación*. As Walker confirms, "one account after another mentions the fact that Havana's mutual-aid agencies, called *cabildos*, conducted a highly reverential ritual that paid homage to the 'king' and 'queen' of each association." Remarkably, when a slave plot was discovered in Cuba in 1842, the testimonials revealed that the conspirators had selected the leaders of the gang in a gathering during which they had performed a "Moorish dance." Brotherhoods seem also to have been involved in the 1791 Haitian uprising. Thornton showed that Kongoledes made up a large percentage of the slaves in the North Province, where the rebellion started and found evidence that one of the leaders of the Haitian revolution respectfully referred to the King of Kongo as "master of all the blacks." The report from an anonymous French militiaman in Haiti also shows that the election of a king was one of the first things that occurred in each liberated quarter. On September 5, 1791, he wrote:

Yesterday, being Sunday the negroes celebrated two marriages in the church at L'Acul. On the occasion they assumed titles, and the titled blacks were treated with great respect, and the ceremony was performed in great pomp. A Capuchin (whose name was Cajetan) retained among them, has been obliged to officiate. Their colors were consecrated and a king was elected. They have chosen one for each quarter.63

Sublette admits the possibility that historians will sooner or later turn up evidence that slave organizations modeled upon brotherhoods also existed in Louisiana. To strengthen his argument, he refers to the abundance of black mutual-aid societies that developed in the nineteenth century, many of which

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carried names of patron saints.\textsuperscript{64} It is, in fact, well-known that in Cuba such mutual-aid societies had their roots in brotherhoods.\textsuperscript{65} Moreover, the funeral processions of black mutual-aid associations in New Orleans followed a procedure that is remarkably similar to that of Kongo brotherhoods. For instance, the similarities between Capt. André Cailloux's funeral in 1863 by the Friends of Order and Mutual Assistance, who in the procession carried his flag-draped coffin on top of which his sword, belt, uniform coat, and cap had been placed, and the description of the 1622 funeral procession of King Álvaro III of Kongo are notable:

The King was taken to St. James' Chapel, where he was buried in the following way: In front of the procession walked \textit{Mani} [Governor] Ando . . . then the trumpeters and drummers followed . . . then the flag of the Holy House of Mercy with its fraternity, the crosses of the brotherhoods, the clergy and dignitaries, and six nobles who carried a litter with the King . . . with his weaponry and covered with a pall of the Order of Christ.\textsuperscript{66}

Michael Smith has convincingly demonstrated the connection between social and benevolent organizations, sometimes called "second-line clubs," and New Orleans's marching band parades. A similar connection seems to exist in the case of the Mardi Gras Indians, as Joseph Roach compares the Indian gangs to "fraternal organization[s]," Kathryn VanSpanckeren notes a connection between Mardi Gras Indians and "neighborhood benevolent associations," and Sublette defines the Indian gang as "a spiritual

\textsuperscript{64}Sublette, \textit{The World that Made New Orleans}, 114-15. Claude Jacobs pointed out that New Orleans may have had black benevolent societies as early as 1783. Claude F. Jacobs, "Benevolent Societies of New Orleans Blacks During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," \textit{Louisiana History}, 29 (1988): 21-33.

\textsuperscript{65}According to Fernando Ortiz, the structure of New Orleans's Union Band Society clearly paralleled that of a Cuban \textit{cabildo}. Ortiz, \textit{Los cabildos y la fiesta afrocubanos del Día de Reyes}, 11-13, 18.

\textsuperscript{66}Ochs, \textit{A Black Patriot and a White Priest}, 2-3; Brásio, \textit{Monumenta missionária Africana}, 15:485-86.
secret society, a social club, and a mutual aid organization." One could thus speculate that the Mardi Gras Indians have their roots in *sangamento*-type king election ceremonies of secret black associations that were modeled upon Luso-Kongolese brotherhoods.

If further research confirms this theory, it would imply that it is a misunderstanding to assume that the Mardi Gras Indians have Native American roots. In *sangamentos*, the use of feathered headwear and the display of bows and arrows have nothing to do with Native Americans but are typical characteristics of Kongolese warriors. Due to similarities between these traditionally Kongolese elements and cliché images of "feathered Indians," both might simply have been mixed together and confused in the context of later events that displayed Native Americans in traditional costumes such as the 1884-85 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows; hence names such as the "Creole Wild West Tribe" or the "101 Wild West" of late nineteenth-century gangs and the assumption (or deliberate attempt to disguise the true origins) by later generations that the tradition had "Indian" roots.

A third option should, however, also be considered. Besides the transformation into "Moor-slayer" on the Iberian Peninsula and into "pagan-slayer" in the Kingdom of Kongo, St. James was transformed for a third time upon arrival on the American continent, where he became known as the "Indian-slayer." In fact, while the Iberian conquerors identified themselves with crusaders, they projected the image of the traditional enemy, that

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of the Moors, on pagan Native Americans. Thus, in the context of the Iberian conquest of the Americas "Santiago Matamoros" came to be replaced by "Santiago Mataíndios." 69

As the conquest of America required strategic alliances with local population groups, the Iberian colonizers had no interest in a general demonization of all Native Americans. They therefore made it possible for indigenous populations to strengthen their alliance to the new rulers through conversion. Moors and Christians represented the ideal type of performance to foster this policy. Catholic orders, eager to expand their power in the Americas through massive indigenous conversion, made ample use of Moors and Christians. They adapted the performance to the local situation, substituting the Moors with pagan Native Americans who stubbornly resist conversion until they are defeated and forced to bow in order to be baptized. 70

Evidence of Moors and Christians whereby pagan Native Americans take over the role of the Moors and whereby Montezuma replaces the Moorish king has been found in Latin America since the sixteenth century. Yet, even in performances where the entire plot was adapted to the local situation, those performing as pagan Native Americans still made occasional references to Moors, and Islamic symbols sometimes remained visible on their headwear and clothing. 71 These Native American adaptations of Moors and Christians became particularly popular in Mexico. Among the many variants—Danza (or Baile) de la Conquista, Los Moros, Los Santiagos, Danza de las Plumas—some, most notably that of the Matachines, display strong indigenous characteristics. 72 Using large headdresses


70 Doudoroff, Moros y Cristianos in Zacatecas, viii; Robert Ricard, The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate . . . (Berkeley, Calif., 1966), 206; Arturo W. Gryj, La danza de moros y cristianos (Mexico, 1972), 80, 120.

71 Gryj, La danza de moros y cristianos, 86-8; Frances Toor, A Treasury of Mexican Folkways: The Customs, Myths, . . . (New York, 1947), 346-52.

72 Harris, Aztecs, Moors, and Christians, 227-34. Similar to the dancer at Congo Square described by Flint, Matachines typically wear a mitrelike headdress with ribbons streaming down the back. Matachine performances are traditionally
made of colored paper, feathers, and beads, those performing the role of pagan Native Americans are usually better dressed than those performing as Spanish Christians, who wear unattractive blue suits and caps.\(^7\) Often, the dances are performed without Christians, and all dancers are dressed as colorful Native Americans.

As early as 1522, Native American dancers from Mexico performed a variant of *Moors and Christians* in Seville, which led Max Harris to assume that these indigenous practices might have influenced the further development of this tradition in Europe.\(^7\) Harris even assumes that Native American variants of *Moors and Christians* influenced African dance traditions on the Iberian Peninsula. The reference to members of a black brotherhood in Seville in 1598 celebrating the feast day of their patron saint "with a banquet, plays, and a tourney, in which twelve blacks, dressed Indian-style, sang and played instruments" has been interpreted by Harris as a sign that blacks in the Hispanic world imitated Amerindian *Matachines*. To support his theory of Native American influences on black performances, Harris also refers to a Corpus Christi procession in Seville in 1693 where black dance director Juan Antonio de Castro organized a *Dance of Motecuzoma* in which he praised Mexican *Matachines* for their newness and variety of movements.\(^7\)

The period of Spanish rule that linked Louisiana to Mexico—on paper, from 1762 to 1800, in practice from 1769 to 1803—allows a connection of this theory to New Orleans. The Spanish authorities only allowed blacks to hold public dances on Sunday evenings, but during the carnival season two dances a week were...
permitted. The act recorded on January 19, 1781, in the *Acts and Records of the Cabildo* indicates that members of the city's black community eagerly participated in Spanish carnival celebrations and that some were wearing feathers: "Because of the great multitude of troops and crews from the ships . . . and the great number of free negroes and slaves in the city, the Attorney General recommends that all kinds of masking, the wearing of feathers, gathering at the local taverns and public dancing by the negroes be prohibited this carnival season." On August 15, 1781, Gov. Francisco Cruzat at St. Louis wrote that "the savages, both free and slaves, and the negroes which belong to this post often dress themselves in barbarous fashion, adorning themselves with vermilion and many feathers which render them unrecognizable."76

As Aurora Lucero-White Lea has shown, the play *Moros y Cristianos* followed the Spanish army into the northern borderlands. The most famous example is *Los Comanches* in New Mexico that references the battle near Staked Plains (Llano Estacado) in 1774. The possibility that the dances of the Mardi Gras Indians may have been inspired by Matachines or other Mexican variants of *Moors and Christians* corresponds to the assumption by several scholars that the incomprehensible phrases sung during performances by the Mardi Gras Indians make the most sense if understood as corruptions of Spanish.77

One of these phrases—"ma-day, cootie-fiyo"—allows speculation about a connection between Indian gangs and the black militias that were established during the Spanish era. The word "ma-day" might relate to the Spanish "matar" (to kill), "cootie" to "con tu" (with your), and "fiyo" to "fijo," a term commonly used for military regiments or units in the colonies. It should, in fact, be noted that

76The January 19 act was quoted from Jerry Brock, "The Indians," *Wavelength*, 101 (1989): 91; the August 15 letter was quoted from Sublette, *The World that Made New Orleans*, 103.

when Alejandro O'Reilly arrived in Louisiana in 1769, his force of about 2,000 men included eighty black and eighty mulatto members of the Cuban battalions. The Spanish administration in Louisiana soon relied on a great number of black military companies to crack down on *cimarrones*, bands of runaway slaves, and to fight the British in the American war for independence. As Kimberly Hanger has shown, free militiamen of color in New Orleans viewed their organization as a corporate entity that allowed them to associate with whites on a theoretically equal basis and that bestowed upon them the honor and privileges that the entire free black community aspired to attain. In other words, they perceived militias as a type of elite brotherhood. As the name *Santa Hermandad*, Holy Brotherhood, for patrols formed by black soldiers indicates, the Spanish authorities seem to have encouraged this perception. Just like brotherhoods, the New Orleans militias were created along racial lines, distinguishing multiracial *pardos* from purely black *morenos*.

It is likely that in the context of black militias a process of identification with Hispanic popular culture took place. Considering that the performance of *Moors and Christians* was particularly popular among Spanish soldiers, members of an army whose patron saint was St. James, a connection to militias may indeed have existed. As Sublette has shown, it was under Spanish rule that the grand tradition of New Orleanians of color playing in military bands began. Moreover, the central role of scouts and flag-bearers, the type of music (drummers and fifers), as well as the strict hierarchy among the participants, corresponds in many ways to that of the militias, with their captains, lieutenants, second lieutenants, sergeants first-class, sergeants second-class, corporals first-class, and corporals second-class.

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It is also notable that several of those who later became elected in prominent positions in New Orleans's black mutual-aid associations had previously been employed in black militias.\textsuperscript{80} The fact that the liberties enjoyed by members of black militias and their relatives during the Spanish era were threatened as soon as Anglo-American rule was imposed provides a credible explanation for the attachment to and continuous performance of a tradition with Hispanic roots.

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For many decades, no one assumed that the dances, parades, and paratheatrical performances known as \textit{Moors and Christians} may provide the key to unlock the secret code of the Mardi Gras Indians. Yet while shedding light on a tradition that for decades has remained in the dark, this connection also opens up new queries. More research will be needed to determine whether the Mardi Gras Indians should be traced back to the European transformation of St. James into "Moor-slayer," the African transformation into "pagan-slayer," or the American transformation into "Indian-slayer." It might even be that all three transformations in some way or other impacted the New Orleans tradition.

The thought that one of New Orleans's strongest symbols of intraracial fraternity might relate to one of the most stereotypical, intolerant, and colonialist performances of Iberian culture may come as a disappointment. As Michael Doudoroff notes, \textit{Moors and Christians} is among "the least attractive verbal artifacts of Hispanic folk culture . . . humorless . . . historically inaccurate, culturally anachronistic, stereotype-laden, and reinforce[ing] execrable prejudices."\textsuperscript{81}

It should be stressed, however, that this tradition acquired a different meaning for the subaltern communities that


\textsuperscript{80}Ochs, \textit{A Black Patriot and a White Priest}, 71.

\textsuperscript{81}Doudoroff, \textit{Moros y Cristianos in Zacatecas}, v.
incorporated it in their own cultures. In order to properly understand the importance of *Moors and Christians* for these communities, the performance should be seen as part of a broader process of transculturation, the absorption and subsequent reinvention of certain European cultural elements during the colonial era. Transculturalism has long been misunderstood as a loss of purity, a form of decadence or even submission to the colonizer. Time and again, scholars narrowly reduced anti-colonial resistance to the attachment to pre-colonial traditions and failed to understand that, in many cases, the appropriation and reinvention of the idiom of the colonizer was a much more effective strategy in dealing with colonial aggression. A revealing example of the fact that this process of transculturation did not imply submission to Western standards can be found in Central Africa, where the rulers of the Kongolese province of Soyo established a new holiday dedicated to St. Luke in 1760 after they had succeeded in administering—thanks to a "miraculous intervention" of this Catholic saint—a humiliating defeat to the Portuguese troops in the Battle of Kitombo.82

Similarly, the decision by the Kongolese King Afonso I to embrace Catholicism did not imply a submission to Western dominance. In fact, he and his successors time and again used the access the new faith had given them to papal diplomacy as a weapon against colonial aggression. It is therefore with good reason that descendants of Africans in their dances and performances all over the Americas still today honor Afonso I, the King of Kongo, as a ruler as mighty as the legendary Charlemagne and Montezuma.
