GOMBO
THE CREOLE DIALECT OF LOUISIANA
WITH A BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Cé langue crapaud qui trahi crapaud

IN THE oldest market of New Orleans, 'mid the babel of Spanish, French, Italian and lacerated English, there may still be heard the cadenced voices of ancient Negresses as they chaffer for their daily needs. Dressed in "guinea-blue" or dull black, with white fichus crossed on their ample bosoms, market-baskets on their arms, they speak a strange, mellow tongue. Sometimes a word or two sounds like French and then it quickly trails off into a jumble, to the uninitiated, of meaningless, musical syllables, smooth and rounded as warm butter.

"Comment to yé, Nanine?" "How are you Nanine?" says one to the other as they meet.

"Mo vaillant, chère, et to?" "I'm well dear and you?"

"Ben, mapé souffri boucou, mé mo mourri pas, mo guerri pas." "Well I suffer a lot, I don't die and I don't get well."

"Ki to gaignin la?" "What have you got there?"

"Dibère, dézef, qua'ti ri, qua'ti poive et lagniappe zallumettes. Ki to gaignin?" "Butter, eggs, half a nickel of rice, half a nickel of pepper and for lagniappe matches. What you got?"

"Mo pas gaignin gran' kichoge. Li tard: fo' mo retournin chez moin: yapé tendé moin." "Not much. It's late, I've got to go home, they're waiting for me."

This soft suave tongue, saturated with the exotic lure of the Tropics, is the Creole Dialect of Louisiana and those who speak it—the Creole Negroes—are separated from the "American" blacks by as great a gulf as exists between Catalans and Spaniards—and the same dislike.

The American Negroes speak only English, are either Methodists or Baptists, and are descended from the slaves brought to Louisiana by the Americans, who teemed into the state after the cession in 1803. This is why, when any dilution of their African blood exists, it is apt to be of Anglo-Saxon origin. The Creole Negroes, on the other hand, are the offspring of the bond servants of the French and Spanish colonists. They are all Catholics and the older ones speak the Creole dialect. Most of them, especially the clever house servants, speak English and standard French as well. They are consummate diplomats, far shrewder and subtler than their "American" brethren—characteristics they owe to their admixture of Latin blood and their association for generations with French and Spanish masters. While these qualities make them more alert and skillful as servants, they lack, for the most part, the touching fidelity of the other blacks.

What to call their jargon was long a bone of contention. The proud, sensitive Creoles disliked the appellation—"Creole Dialect"—given it by scholars. They resented the association of "Creole" with a black man's *baragouin*, for they did not want anyone to mistake the dialect as theirs. They felt too that it might lead to a misunderstanding of the real meaning of the noun "Creole," which can only be applied to a person entirely white, born of French or Spanish ancestors, in Louisiana or in certains of the "Iles sous le Vent," as the West Indies are so poetically called.

Nevertheless, the word "Creole" is also used as an adjective to denote anything indigenous to Louisiana; Creole cabbage, Creole eggs, Creole mules are ac-

cepted colloquialisms. Even the term "Creole nigger" is in common use, so, if we limit the word to its meaning of "indigenous," there seems a valid precedent for applying the term "Creole" to the patois.

Professor Alceé Fortier tried to save Creole sensibilities by calling it the "Negro French Dialect";[1] but this appellation was criticised by Lafcadio Hearn, who wrote that it seemed "a slight affectation to apply to this patois the term 'Negro-French,' as Mr. Fortier has done—probably for the mere purpose of saving hypersensitiveness; and we think so because the only reason why the patois has a great philological interest is just because it is *not* Negro-French. Negro-French exists, but it is something quite different; and so long as philology the world over applies to such dialects as that now under consideration the term 'Creole,' there is no necessity for any euphemisms. The original expression is admirably significative,—as implying not only a form of language, but also the special conditions which gave the language existence."[2]

All this discussion might have been obviated by accepting the popular name for the dialect in Louisiana which is "Gombo"[3]—an exotic and interesting word,

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[1] "The French Language in Louisiana and the Negro-French Dialect" by Alcée Fortier. Transactions of the Modern Language Association of America. Vol. II, 1884–5, pp. 96–111.

[2] From "A Sketch of the Creole Patois," an unsigned article by Lafcadio Hearn in the Times-Democrat of New Orleans of October 17, 1886. It was reprinted in "The American Miscellany," Lafcadio Hearn, Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1924, Vol. II, pp. 154–158.

[3] The New English Dictionary says that "gombo" is derived from the Angolan word *kingombo*, the *ki* being the usual Bantu prefix and *ngombo* the root word for okra.

"Gombo" has come to have many meanings in Louisiana. Not only is it the vernacular for the sticky black mud of the Delta country, and for okra, but it has given its name as well to the royal family of soups made from this glutinous vegetable—*gombo filé*, *gombo fevi*, and *gombo zhèrbes*.

This is the way a Creole Negro cook would tell you how to make a good gombo:

"Premié chose: yé prend la vianne la qui yé pélé 'tasso', metté li dans to chodière avec ein ti brin la graisse et ein ti brin la farine, laissé li tourné so couleur, ein pé brun, après ça metté ein pé des zonions et ein pé di laye, pas trop di laye, paské ça va fé li senti movai; après metté assé de lo pou fai tan to oulai, quand li presse fini, metté filé la dan; mai mo blié di meté troi ou quat feulles lérié la dan. Si to gagné des crab ou des chevret to capab metté yé la dan.

"Veillé bien qui li pas brulé et to va fai bon gombo.

"Mo blié di fau mangé li avec di ri."

far more appropriate than any other for it stems from Africa. But however apt a name for the patois it may be, I am afraid that philologists have used "Creole Dialect" too long to make any change now.

A CHILD OF NECESSITY

This Gombo, sometimes called "Congo"[1] by brash Negroes of the younger generation as a taunting reminder of its semi-barbarous parentage, was literally a child of necessity. When the slave-traders loaded their ships on the Gold Coast with human merchandise for Louisiana, they were careful to choose Negroes from many different tribes, who could not understand each other's speech. It was a precaution against concerted uprising and the same plan was followed by Creole planters in recruiting their *ateliers*, or slave gangs. As a result the *bossals*, as African-born serfs were called, found themselves in a strange land, unable to understand the language of their masters or even to communicate with many of their fellows in misfortune, who spoke different tribal tongues. French, which had taken centuries to develop into a most subtle intricate form—the height of sophistication—was far too complex for these simple savages to learn. So they did their poor, primitive best and contrived a queer, simplified "pidgin" French dialect of their own.

The incubation of this weird jargon paralleled at every point the birth of the French language. Just as the clumsy efforts of the semi-barbarous Gallic tribes to master the speech of their highly civilized Roman conquerors gave rise to the bastard, lacerated Latin, which came to be called French; so did the attempts of these aboriginal blacks to acquire the idiom of their owners produce the Creole dialect. These two efforts, centuries apart, of an inferior race to learn the language of a superior resulted in amazing similarities—

[1] "Gombo Zhèbes" by Lafcadio Hearn, New York. Will H. Coleman, 1885 p. 3.

how similar may be seen by a comparison of the few lines of the "Chanson de Roland," translated into Gombo by Alcée Fortier, with the same stanzas in the original Old French.

CHANSON DE ROLAND[1]

CREOLE DIALECT	OLD FRENCH
Conte Roland assite enba in pin	Li quens Rollanz se jut desuz un pin,
côté l'Espagne li tournin so figuire,	envers Espaigne en ad turnet sun vis,
li commence pensé boucou kichoge:	de plusurs choses a remembrer li prist:
tou laterre yé li prenne comme in brave,	de tantes terres cume li bers ciunquist,
la France si doux, nomme so famille,	de dulce France, des humes de sun lign,
é Charlemagne so maite, qui té nouri li	de Charlemagne sun seigneur kil nurrit,
li pa capab' péché crié é soupiré.	ne poet muër nen plurt e ne suspirt.
main li vé pa blié li meme,	mais lui meïsme ne volt metre en ubli,
li confessé so péché, mandé bon Djé pardon·	claimet sa culpe, si prïet deu mercit:
'mo bon papa qui jamin menti,	veire paterne ki unkes ne mentis,
qui té ressuscité Saint Lazare	saint Lazarun de mort resurrexis,
et sauvé Daniel de lion layé,	e Danïel des liuns guaresis,
sauvé mo zame dé tou danzer	guaris de mei l'anme de tuz perils
pou péché qué dans mo la vie mo fai.	pur les pecchiez que en ma vie fis!
so dégant drêt li ofri bon Djé,	son destre guant à deu en purofrit,
saint Gabriel prenne li dans so la main	sainz Gabrïels de sa main li ad pris
enhau so bra li tchombo so latéte,	desur sun braz teneit le chief enclin,
so lamain yé jointe, é li mouri enfin.	juintes ses mains est alez a sa fin.

[1]"Louisiana Studies," by Alcée Fortier. F. F. Hansell & Bro, New Orleans, 1894.

bon Djé voyé so zange cherubin — deus li tramist sun angle cherubin
é saint Michiel dé lamer péril — e saint Michiel de la mer del peril.
avec yé saint Gabriel vini — ensemble od els sainz Gabriel i vint:
é yé porté so zme dans paradis. — l'anme del cunte portent en pareïs.

It is this analogy in the development of the two tongues which makes the Creole Dialect so important to philologists, for it permits them to study, step by step, in the genesis and growth of a comparatively modern language still spoken in its pristine form, the changes which must have occurred in the evolution from Latin to Old French.

Grammar

It would be impossible to describe here, for it would take an entire volume, all the myriad ways in which the tongues of African slaves mutilated and amputated the French language. There is room for only a few typical instances, but it may be taken as axiomatic that they all, without exception, made for simplification, for the Negro was as lazy of brain as he was of brawn—so lazy he always took the easiest way. Not only was he handicapped by a mentality so primitive that, to express himself at all, he had first to pare the language to its barest bones, but he was also hampered by differences of physical structure. His bulbous lips and thick tongue made it impossible for him to pronounce certain French vowel sounds. In his mouth *juge* became *jige*, *tortue—torti*, *nuit—nouitte*, and the rolled French *r* was quite beyond his powers, so he just "paid it no never-mind," said *neg'* instead of *nègre* and *vend'* for *vendre*.[1]

Able neither to read nor write, language to him was purely an auditory experience, so only the salient

[1]There is an exception. In certain cases where an *r* occurs in the last syllable, it is transposed and faintly sounded. e.g. *Dormir* is twisted into *dromi*.

syllables of a word stuck in his memory and he pruned ruthlessly first and last syllables whenever he could. *Appeler* was abridged to *'pele, capable* to *capab'* and *aujourd'hui* became *'jordi.*

Grammatical gender seemed an unnecessary complication and was dispensed with, as were also the definite and partitive articles, except certain rudimentary traces, which survived because the Negro thought they were part of the noun. As he heard *du* and *vin* used so often together, he made the natural mistake of thinking that the word for wine was *duvin,* or as he pronounced it *divin.* In the same way *de l'eau* became *dolo, des oeufs—dé zef, l'amour—lamou, les habitants—zabitant* and *un homme—nomme.* This grammatical marriage, which took place for the most part only with words of one syllable, led him into the quaint error of saying *quat' nomme* (four one man), *ein lérat* (one the rat), *plisiers latabe* (many the table) and *ein joli labouche* (a pretty the mouth).

Whenever he could make himself understood without it, the Negro omitted the verb entirely and, like a child who whimpers "me sick," he said "mo malade." But wherever a verb was indispensible, he made the most drastic simplifications. Much too stupid to understand the intricate meanings of the different verb endings, the Negro just dumped them overboard and only kept a modified form of the past participle. This he used without change for all tenses and all persons. Differences in tense were indicated by the simple expedient of combining certain suffixes with the personal pronouns:

mo	(je)	I	*nou*	(nous)	we
to	(tu)	thou	*vou*	(vous)	you
li	(il, elle)	he, she	*yé*	(ils, elles)	they

For the present tense he added *après* in the sense in which an Irishman says, "I'm after doing it"—a form found also in Languedoc—and, following his natural bent for excising unnecessary syllables, he compressed

mo and *après* into *mapé,* so the present indicative of "to eat" would be:

mapé manzé	I eat (am after eating)	*noupé manzé*
tapé manzé		*voupé manzé*
lapé manzé		*yepé manzé*

Hearing his master repeat *j'étais, il était* in connection with actions already completed, he came to associate the sound of *te* with the past and added it to the personal pronoun to indicate the Imperfect tense. For the verb "to hear" it would be:

moté tendé	I used to hear	*nouté tendé*
toté tendé		*vouté tendé*
lité tendé		*yété tendé*

But when he wished to express a definite past, he didn't even bother to retain the little sound of *te;* instead he merely used the personal pronouns and his only verb form. So the Perfect of "to go" would be:

mo couri	I went	*nou couri*
to couri		*vou couri*
li couri		*ye couri*

This verb, by the way, is one of the most serviceable in the Creole Dialect, because *couri* (French: courir) means not only "to go," but also "to walk," "to run," "to follow" and "to come."

Having heard his master use such phrases as *Il va faire* and *Tu vas souper,* the sound *va* came to epitomize to the Negro the idea of the future; so he tacked it on to his personal pronoun and squeezed the resulting *mova* into *ma.* Consequently the future of "to cut" would be:

ma coupé	I will cut	*na coupé*
ta coupé		*va coupé*
la coupé		*ya coupé*

These are roughly some of the changes which occurred and they show sufficient of the vicissitudes which the verb underwent to give some idea of the lines of least resistance along which it developed; and,

while certain of the philologists may not entirely agree with the formations here given, they have at least the sanction of Dr. Alfred Mercier.

All the typical deformations of pronunciation and construction which I have mentioned, as well as myriads more which I have not, were so drastic—so revolutionary—that they spawned an entirely new language as radically different from Standard French as Mediaeval French was from the Latin which gave it birth. Indeed, as a matter of actual fact, more grammatical differences exist between Gombo and French, than between Portuguese and Spanish.

African Influence

This infant Creole idiom, infinitely simpler and softer-sounding than its parent, proved a lusty child and, like a predacious tropical vine smothering the surrounding vegetation, it entirely supplanted all the tribal jargons the slaves brought with them from Africa: until, today, not more than fifteen words of African origin are in use in Louisiana.

This number does not include a few others, which still may be heard in Voodoo incantations, although their meanings have been long since forgotten by the blacks who sing them.

Lafcadio Hearn, with a great deal of difficulty, persuaded an ancient, colored "conjur" woman to sing one of these Voudou incantations, but even she did not have the slightest idea what it meant. Here it is as Hearn transcribed it.

Heru mandé, heru mandé, heru mandé[1]
Tigi li papa

[1]New Orleans Item, November 8, 1879.

George W. Cable republished these same words with a musical setting in "Creole Slave Songs": *Century Magazine* of April, 1886. Neither he nor Hearn ever discovered their meaning.

Professor Puckett suggests in "Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro": by Newbell Niles Puckett, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1926, p. 19, that "the words *tigui li* seem to be the African *tigewala*, 'a maker of charms,' or 'medicine-man'; and that the concluding sentence, *Do sé dan godo*, to be *Do dsi dank godo*, 'Oh curved snake, may you be fat'; i.e., 'have a good meal'."

Heru mandé
Tigi li papa
Heru mandé
Heru mandé, heru mandé
Do sé dans godo
Ah tingonai yé;
Ah tingonai yé, ah tingonai yé,
Ah ouai ta, ah ouai ya,
Do sé dans godo
Ah tingonai yé
Tigi li papa, etc.

Even so rudimentary a speech as the Creole Dialect had its own peculiar art forms, and the lush Negro imagination found expression in three directions: in songs, in proverbs and in quaint animal fables.

Fables

These latter are Gombo versions of the same "Brer Rabbit" stories that Joel Chandler Harris collected from English-speaking blacks. A regular ritual preceded their recital. The Negro narrator would call loudly "Bonne foi! Bonne foi!" to attract attention and also to certify to the truth of his story. His hearers immediately answered with a chorus of "Lapin! Lapin!" to indicate that they were just as clever as Compair Lapin—the incarnation of cunning—and would accept his statements only with a grain of salt. Then he would launch into some ingenuous tale like that of Compair Bouki (Friend Goat), who fired up his kettle and began to sing to attract the Macaques (Monkeys). After the simian tribe had gathered, Compair Bouki said, "I'm going to jump in the kettle, and when I say, 'I'm cooked,' take me out." They did as he ordered, but when the monkeys' turn came and they jumped into the pot and then asked to be taken out, Compair Bouki replied ironically, "If you were cooked, you wouldn't be able to say so." Only one little macaque escaped, Bouki ate all the rest.

When Compair Bouki got hungry again, he tried the same trick. But the little monkey had warned his

kin, so, when the goat, expecting to be taken out, said, "I'm cooked," the macaques left him in the pot and chanted gleefully, "If you were cooked, you wouldn't be able to say so!"

These tales, born in Africa, and handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, are now forgotten by all but a few of the old Creole Negroes, and for fear of ridicule, they are loth to relate them to grown-ups. Lafcadio Hearn considered them most important. "Full of grotesque humor and vivid fancy," he thought they afforded the best available material for a study of the idiom. But in spite of his opinion, the proverbs are more interesting.

Proverbs

Someone has described proverbs as "the wisdom of many and the wit of one," but I prefer the definition which calls them "the wisdom of nations." This is peculiarly true in the case of the Negro, for, illiterate as he was, he had no other means of handing on the accumulated fruits of his experience except through these pithy, easily remembered sayings. They contain the quintessence of his quaint, humorous philosophy, and this probably explains their charm.

They show a clear-eyed realization not only of the foibles of the white man but also of the colored man. No class is spared. The mulatto's passion for boasting is pilloried in a line, "*Metté milâte enhau choual, li va di negresse pas so maman.*" (Put a mulatto on horseback and he'll tell you his mother wasn't a Negress.) There could be no more humorously cynical comparison of the capacity for evil of the black man, the mulatto and the white man than:

Neg' porté maïs dan so lapoche pou volé poules;
milâte porté cordon dan so lapoche pou volé choual;
n'homme blanc porté larzan dan so lapoche pou trompé fille.

Nigger carries corn in his pocket to steal chickens;
mulatto carries a rope in his pocket to steal a horse;
white man carries money in his pocket to seduce a girl.

Many of these "ditons," as they are sometimes called, are based upon a shrewd and exact observation of the peculiarities of animals cast to play the part of the human beings to be satirized. *Capon vivé longtems,* (the coward—capon—lives a long time), puts to shame for vividness and succinctness, our "He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day"; while *Lapin pa capab' gagnin piti san gran zoreil* (rabbits can't have young without long ears) and *Coupé zoreil milet, ca pa fé li choual* (Cutting a mule's ears don't make him a horse) are equally salty.

These terse sayings are often packed with common sense. Who can deny that *où y'en charogne, y'en carencro*[1] (where there's carrion, there you'll find buzzards); and certainly no better warning could be given a young Negress by her mother than *mari napas trouvé dan vetivere*[2] (you won't find a husband in a haycock). A black wench, weeping at the defection of her lover might learn a profitable lesson from being told *zieux rouge pa brulé savane* (red eyes will never set the field afire); and a slave might be warned of the futility of revolt by the quaint saying "*maringouin perdi so tems quand li pique caïman*" (mosquito wastes his time when he tries to bite alligator). To make a virtue of necessity might well be taught by the saying:

Quand na pas choual, monté bourique,
Quand na pas bourique, monté cabri,
Quand na pas cabri, monté jamb.

When you haven't a horse, ride a donkey,
When you haven't a donkey, ride a goat,
When you haven't a goat, ride (your own) legs.

Songs

It was in songs, however, that the Creole Negro best found vent for his moods, and his "ballets" fall roughly into three categories: love plaints, dance ditties and

[1]*Carencro* is one of the few English words that has been absorbed into Gombo. Just as "beef steak" has become *bifstek* in French so "carrion crow" has become *carencro* in Gombo.

[2]Vetiveria Odorata, a sweet-smelling root, used to be planted around the cane fields and was a favorite resort for lovers.

"taunt" songs. He has no equivalent of the "American" Negro spiritual for, being Catholic, his music is entirely secular. The lyrics he improvised are of child-like simplicity, their melodies light and gay, often reminiscent of the 18th Century French *chansons* he heard in his master's household.

Of the love songs some are merely mushily sentimental while others are ingenuously erotic. No simile could be more of the earth, earthy, than that in the chorus of "Céleste mo bel Bijou," which insists over and over again, that the dusky singer adores Celeste like "a pig does mud"; and some of the verses are not without *arrière pensée.*

CELESTE MO BEL BIJOU

Ref.:[1] *Ah! Celeste, ah! Celeste, mo bel bijou,*
Ah! Celeste, ah! Celeste, my pretty jewel,
mo l'aimai to com cochon l'aimai la bou.
I love you as a pig loves mud.

Si to 'tai zozo zami	If you were a bird, my friend
et mo 'tai fisi, zami,	and I a gun, my friend,
mo 'tai tué toi, zami	I would kill you, my friend,
à fo'ce mo l'aimai toi.	because I love you so.

Ref.: *Ah! Celeste, ah! Celeste,* etc.

Si to 'tai bayou, zami,	If you were a bayou, my friend,
mo 'tai poisson, zami,	I a fish, my friend,
mo 'tai nagé dan toi, zami,	I would swim in you, my friend,
à fo'ce mo l'aimai toi.	because I love you so.

Ref.: *Ah! Celeste, ah! Celeste, etc.*

Si to 'tai la bou, zami,	If you were mud, my friend,
mo 'tai cochon, zami,	I a pig, my friend,
mo 'tai rabouré dan toi, zami,	I would wallow in you, my friend
à fo'ce mo l'aimai toi.	because I love you so.

One of the mysteries of folklore is that this simple ballad, composed by some illiterate black singer of Louisiana, parallels in thought "Oh Sally My Dear," a

[1]The chorus comes before the verse in gombo songs.

popular 18th Century folk song of West England, which contains these lines:

> If the women were hares and raced round the mountain,
> How soon the young men would take guns and go hunting!
>
> If the women were ducks and swum round the water,
> The men would turn drakes and soon follow after.

But the song with the most subtle suggestiveness is "Adele," in which the love-sick black sings to his sweetheart:

To tou com serpent sonète,	You are just like a rattlesnake,
qui connin charmé zozo,	who knows how to charm a bird,
qui gaignin bouche à li prête	who has a mouth ready
pou servi com youn tombo.	to serve as a tomb.

There is no more typical example of a pure dance ditty than "Bal Macouba"; and its genesis shows just how these folk-songs are born. I heard it from an old colored butler, so ancient he remembered shining shoes for the black legislators during Reconstruction days. Cotton looked like a tiny, wizened jockey, bent and dried, and his bright little eyes peered out of a wrinkled face, *teint pomme cuite*[1], as he told me about Edward Delpit, who was a fat "chesnut-brown," and a slave in the Delpit family, whose name he appropriated. He cooked for them and, in odd moments, worked in their tobacco factory helping to make "Macouba," their famous brand of snuff; and so the Negroes christened him after the "sneeze powder." Freed by the Civil War, he left the Delpits and, in the 1870s, opened a little restaurant on Trémé Street between Bayou and Quartier. Here every Sunday he gave a *gran' boubousse*—Creole for "big blow-out"—and all the prettiest of the octoroon wenches came to eat and spend the afternoon dancing the *bamboula*.

This weekly festival became so popular that colored *commères*, meeting in the French Market, would ask each other:

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[1]Baked apple color. Creole Negroes use this phrase to describe a light yellowish-brown complexion. The reddish skin coloring they call *teint sauvage*, "Indian color."

"Ou to p'allé Dimance soir?"
and the answer always was:
"M'apé couri dan bal chez Macouba."

Some anonymous black troubadour set this oft-repeated phrase to a gay little refrain, so merry that it haunted the memory of all who heard it.

Mapé couri dan bal, dan bal, dan bal,
I'm going to the ball, to the ball, to the ball,
Mapé couri dan bal, dan bal chez Macouba,
I'm going to the ball, to the ball at Macouba's.
Aie, yaie, yaie, compair Lapin,
Aie, yaie, yaie, friend Rabbit,
Li un ti bougre qui conné dansé.
He's a little bugger who knows how to danse.
Aie, yaie, yaie, compair Lapin,
Aie, yaie, yaie, friend Rabbit,
Li un ti bougre qui conné sauté.
He's a little bugger who knows how to jump.

The song, probably, had innumerable verses, most of them did, but one is all that remains. Even that would have been forgotten had not an old Negro chanted it for years in the Vieux Carré to attract attention to his wares as he peddled ice cream from a wheelbarrow.

The festive irresponsibility of this simple jingle fascinated the colored population and it became the most popular tune at Delpit's reunions. The main music at these parties was songs, in which everybody joined, and a pulsing undertone was provided by an old African-born Negro, who sat on his haunches in a corner, beating savage rhythms on a large drum, with alternate strokes of palm and fingers. A wizened Congo sat beside him and achieved weird syncopation by grating a huge brass key along the teeth of a mule's jawbone, held in his hand.

To a full chorus of *Mapé couri dan bal, dan bal, dan bal*, the young quadroon wenches in gay tignons and gowns of Indienne danced lightly to the middle of the floor and began their gyrations. The small room

became stifling as the dance grew wilder, and the swaying onlookers patted with their feet and clapped their hands in an intoxicating counter rhythm to the deep, wild throbbing of the *bamboula*.[1]

Krehbiel[2] insists that the habit of lyrical lampooning was originally an African custom, which the slaves brought with them to Louisiana. All the African kings and chiefs, so he says, had in their entourage men who filled the functions of the court jester of the Middle Ages and had the ability to improvise songs, particularly those of a satirical turn. Subjects suing for royal favor were in the habit of bribing these bards to vaunt their prowess in verse, or at least to abstain from ridiculing them.

As long as they lived these ebon singers wielded great power, but they were so hated that when they died they were denied the right of burial and their bodies were thrown into hollow trees to rot.

The Creole Negroes made frequent, and sometimes cruel, use of this inherited knack of improvisation and some of their taunt songs have survived a hundred years. They are the most interesting and informative group of all the patois ballads, for each was inspired by some actual happening which aroused the malice or hatred of its long dead black author: and so these lyrical expressions of venom and spite have served as an embalming fluid to preserve little human tragedies of the past that would otherwise have been forgotten.

Of all these taunt songs, "Toucoutou"[3] is probably the most cruel, for it exposed the attempt of a pretty young girl, whose nickname is used as its title, to pass into the ranks of the whites.

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[1]*Bamboula* is a drum, so named because in the West Indies it was made from a huge joint of bamboo over the end of which was stretched a goat's skin. The word is composed of *bambou* plus *la*, the definitive article "the," which in Creole often follows the noun. *Bamboula* is also the name of the dance performed to the music of the drums.

[2]"Afro-American Folksongs," by Henry Edward Krehbiel, New York, G. Schirmer, 1914, p. 141–143.

[3]For a detailed account of the genesis of this song, see "Toucoutou," by Edward Larocque Tinker, New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1928.

Although she showed no traces of being *barbouillé* (having Negro blood), there was a tignon[1] in the family, as the saying goes, and she was what the Creole Negroes call a *blanc-fo'cé*, or *passe-à-blanc*. In order to support her claim she brought an action for libel against a neighbor who, through jealousy, had publicly accused her of having Negro blood. The case was carried to the Supreme Court of the State, and when it was adjudged that Toucoutou had a touch of the tar brush, Joe Beaumont, a mulatto barber with a gift for minstrelsy, voiced in a brutal song the mixed contempt and envy, which the Negro population of New Orelans feels towards those of their color who try to "pass" as white.

It made Toucoutou the butt of a whole city and everywhere she went its mean, mocking little chorus followed her as closely as her shadow. Nowhere were her ears safe from:

Ah! Toucoutou, yé connin vou,	Ah! Toucoutou, they're wise to you,
Vou cé tin Morico;	You're just a nigger wench;
Na pa savon qui tacé blanc	There is no soap so white, for true
Pou blanchi vou lapo.	Your sooty skin to blench.

Even though the song is still sung, the story of Toucoutou's tragedy, which happened just before the Civil War, was completely forgotten and it was not until after a long search that I found the records of the lawsuit and was able to reconstruct the tale.

Another interesting song is "Le Chanson du Vié Boscoyo," sometimes called "Michié Preval" after its satirized hero, or "Calinda" after a dance brought from Santo Domingo by the refugees from the Negro uprising. In the most sprightly manner it tells the tale of a certain Judge Preval, who permitted his colored coachman, Louis, to give a ball in the stable. Negroes and Negresses from the whole Vieux Carré attended, many of them surreptitiously borrowing their masters'

[1]The Tignon de Madras, worn by Negresses on their heads, was considered a badge of servitude, so to say there was a tignon in the family was an accusation of colored blood.

and mistresses' finery with which to adorn themselves. Unfortunately the watchman stumbled in, and finding no permit had been obtained, carted all the participants off to jail. The next morning they were well whipped and poor Michié Preval himself was fined a hundred piastres.

Although composed originally as a taunt, this ballad came to be used for dancing also, for its chorus,

Dansé Calinda, bou-djoumb! bou-djoumb!
Dansé Calinda, bou-djoumb!

had a most catching syncopated tune. Indeed it was so popular it became the vehicle for all musical lampoons and the politician who went through a campaign without being pilloried to its sprightly strains was either very much liked or unbelievably lucky. Not even those in high places escaped. During one of the many floods which inundated New Orelans and rose above the level of the ground floors, the distinguished, stout and pompous Monsieur Mazureau, who had been attorney-general of Louisiana, sat at his desk with his feet in a wooden wash-tub to keep them dry. The sight of this dignified jurist perfectly unconscious of the amusing picture he made, so touched the risibilities of some passing colored man that he immediately improvised a little verse that spread like an epidemic through the city and everybody, Creoles and Negroes alike, laughed as they sang:

Michié Mazureau	Mr. Mazureau
dan so vié bureau,	in his old office,
li semblé crapau	looked like a frog
dan ein la bail doleau.	in a pail of water.

Ref.: *Dansé Calinda, bou-djoumb! bou-djoumb! etc.*

It had all the succinct completeness of a Japanese hokku and in fourteen words it gave a picture so unforgettable that it has survived for over sixty years.

It was to this same tune that the white children used to sing

'Mericain coquin,	American rascal
billé en nankin,	dressed in Nankeen,
voleur di pain	stealer of bread
ché Michié D'Aquin	from Mr. D'Aquin
à quat' heures di matin.	at four in the morning.
Dansé Calinda, bou-djoumb etc.	

whenever they saw a hated Yankee passing by on the *banquet.* These youngsters merely reflected the feelings of their elders in this, because the dislike existing between Creole and American antedated the acquisition of Louisiana by the United States.

Even more personal shafts were launched to the music of "Dansé Calinda," for although the Negro was kept in strict subserviance, he was not entirely without weapons with which to avenge a wrong. Many a white person who had offended some black rhymester awoke to find the most intimate details of his private life exposed in verse to pitiless publicity.

This calamity happened to poor Madame Kircsleger and for a month she was ashamed to set foot outdoors because the whole neighborhood was laughing at a Gombo ditty which aired her most secret ailment. This is what the bad little boys were singing:

Madame Kircsleger	Mrs. Kircsleger
Li sisit parterre	she sat on the floor
li fé oun dé ver	she passed a taenia
Oun dé ver solitaire	a solitary taenia
Dansé Calinda, bou-djoumb etc.	
Li pélé Virginie,	She called Virginia,
Virginie li vini.	Virginia she came.
Li prend pot lá	She took the pot
Met li sou so bras	put it under her arm
Li porté li l'apothicaire lá	she took it to the apothecary
Dansé Calinda etc.	
Monsieur Vézion	Mr. Vezion
Li met so lunette,	he put on his glasses,
Li di cé ben ça,	he said that's it,
Mo oir so lá tête.	I see its head.
Dansé Calinda etc.	

THE DIALECT AS A LITERARY AMUSEMENT

Although the Louisiana planters used to give orders to their slaves in Gombo, just as Americans in China spoke to their servants in "Pidgin English," they scorned it for years as a servile, bastard tongue until, at last, they came to realize that in it they possessed a second language, endeared to them by many childhood memories and full of quaint turns of phrase, freshness of expression, and a primitive sententiousness altogether charming. It was then that the Creoles began to take down phonetically the odd humorous stories of talking animals, which had delighted their infancy. These transcriptions were published in Creole journals as diverting curiosities and it was in this manner that the white man came to supply an orthography for the black man's speech. It had its faults, for every amateur of Gombo worked out his own method of translating the sounds into written words and was ready to battle to the death for the superiority of his system of notation. Consequently there were no standard rules, but, like a cooking recipe, it was "spell to taste." Not only did one authority differ from the other, but the same person did not always spell the same word in the same way. There were, for instance, four different spellings for "grass"—*zerb, zerbe, zherb, zhèbes*—and Fortier was guilty of three variations of "God"—*Dje, Djé, Djié.*

In the 1850s a few Creoles began to write verses in the Gombo[1] as a tour de force and tried to imitate the Negro's psychology as closely as they did his speech. The earliest example I have found was a little poem called "La Caze du Nègre,"[2] but, like most of the

[1]In employing Gombo for their original compositions, the Creoles followed an old precedent established in the North. Strange as it may seem, the first song unmistakably American in origin, was a patriotic ballad written by a white man in the American Negro dialect. It was called "The Seige of Plattsburg" (or "Back side Albany"), and celebrated the victory against the English won on September 11, 1814. See "The Negro in Early American Songsters" by S. Foster Damon, The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, Vol. 28, pp. 143-144.

[2]Published March 12, 1859 in *Le Meschacébé*, a parish newspaper of Louisiana. For information about this journal see "Bibliography of the French Newspapers and Periodicals of Louisiana," by Edward Larocque Tinker. Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society for October, 1932; or its reprint.

others written by white men, it was so studied and artificial that anyone, familiar with the Gombo, could immediately distinguish it from the songs improvised by the Negroes themselves.

The Civil War put an end to all such frivolous literary amusements and it was not until it was over that the tragic Reconstruction period revealed a new use for Gombo.

The Carpetbaggers had snatched control of the State and its treasury and had rewarded the Negroes for their votes by making their leaders judges, Custom House officials and members of the Legislature. The white population was implacably opposed to Negroes in office; that they were totally unfitted to administer them was only one of the many reasons why they resented it so bitterly. It was a tragedy, but the Southerners were powerless. They were politically hamstrung for Federal bayonets supported the rule of their despoilers. All they could do was to vent their impotent anger in satirical articles in the newspapers, attacking the Carpetbaggers and their colored allies. It was their sole safety valve, and to couch their sarcasms in Gombo, with all its implication of ignorance and a servile past, seemed to the Creoles to add a subtle tang.

Their principal target was Caius César Antoine, a Creole Negro whose peculiarities lent themselves to lampooning. He was a small man, very much of a dandy, with a face as black as a crow's wing, who before the war had been a barber on a river steamboat. After he became Lieutenant-Governor of Louisiana and President of the State Legislature, in 1872, the "Carillon," a fierce, brilliant little Creole weekly, never went to press without some ridiculous tale of his doings written in Gombo. The contributors took a sadistic joy in describing with Rabelaisian detail how he deserted Mirabelle for Françoese, a huge *marchande de calas*, who weighed "214 pounds net"; and one of them celebrated this defection in a few Gombo verses, meant to be sung to a tune from "La Fille de Madame Angot."

Ah, cé don' toi, César Caïman,	Ah, then it's you Caesar Alligator,
Toi qui billé com' ein paon,	You who dressed like a peacock,
Qui fai la cour au jeine négresse,	Who makes love to a young Negress,
Et jamais gardé la viellesse.	And never looks at old age.
Cété pou marchan' pan patate,	It was for a gingerbread peddler,
Ki to metté to bel cravate;	That you put on your pretty cravat;
Cété pou marchan' cala,	It was for a doughnut seller,
Ki to fai to coq jinga.	That you made yourself a Guinea cock.
Pas vini di moin cé pas vrai	Don't come tell me it isn't true
Ma foué to ein coup balai;	I'll give you a crack with my broom;
Mo va cassé to gro caouaine[1]	I'll break your big head
Aussi vrai que to non cé Antouène	As sure as your name's Antoine.

Pages and pages were published telling how with "fis' and feet," as the Negroes say, Françoese scared him into a marriage ceremony and made him legitimize their children by a special act of legislature.

A clowning account also appeared of his installation into office. As he and Françoese, so the tale went, were waiting to make their entry into the Senate Chamber, she undertook to correct his manners by saying:

Fini gratté to la tête com' ca; ya croi que to gagnin tits bêtes dan to chiveu.
Stop scratching your head like that; they will think you have little beasts in your hair.

To which the Lieutenant-Governor replied with dignity:

"Mo fiche pas mal, ça yé va croi. Est-ce que négue et milate pas connin que moune pas gagnin zongles pour arient?"
I dont give a darn what people think. Dont the nigger and the mulatto know that people haven't got nails for nothing?

After this choice bit of polite badinage, the triumphal march began, but just as Antoine reached the middle of the legislative chamber, he caught sight of "Zozo" Barber, a huge black senator, in whose shop he had formerly plied a razor, and, stopping the procession, he fell into his arms, saying:

[1]Caouaine is a black snapping turtle with a very hard shell, used here as a slang expression for Negro's head.

Oui mo content voi toi, Zozo; hein, qui sré dit qu'in jour nou té douaite trouvé ensemble dan Sénat pou fai loi pou nou ti maître yé? Et to rasoirs, yé coupé toujou bien?

Yes, I'm glad to see you Zozo; well, who would have said that one day we would have found ourselves together in the Senate to make laws for our little masters? And your razors, do they still cut well?

Françoese was so scandalized at this breach of decorum that she clambered over the railing and, seizing her lord and master by the naps on his head, she threw him on his back, upsetting in her violence all the white carpetbag senators who were standing near. This is a sample of the "Carillon's" burlesque, which, though generally quite witty, sometimes descended to puerility.

A great deal of the lampooning was done in rhyme, and one amusing poem turned on the fact that, as Antoine's initials were C. C., the "Carillon" had christened him "César Caïman." Entitled "Société Protectrice," its five verses described the humane work of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and said that all the carpetbaggers and Negro office-holders were taking refuge under its wing, as they could easily prove that they were eligible. It predicted that:

Liétenant-gouvernair Antouène	Lieutenant-Governor Antoine
Dan so joie, va dansé cancan,	In his joy will dance a cancan,
Pasque li capab' san peine	Because he can without trouble
Prouvé que li c'est Caïman.	Prove that he's an alligator.

And as for Barber, the black militia general nicknamed "Zozo" (Creole for bird), it said:

Et que de beaux rêves	And what beautiful dreams
Barber va fé quand li dodo,	Barber will have as he sleeps
Asteur li gagnin bon préve	Now he has good proof
Qué li c'est ein gro zozo.	That he's a big bird.

For over three years the "Carillon" continued to ridicule the colored office-holders in these skits, of which the most devastating was called "Ti Macaque Vini Gran'"—the little monkey grows important.

It described in no flattering terms Antoine's rise to power from a poor barber with "eyes in the seat of his pants" to the post of acting governor. Before every verse came the refrain:

Macaque la, li té pitit,	That monkey, he was little,
Macaque la. li vini gran',	That monkey, he grew large,
Li qui té plus qu'ein souris,	He who was but a mouse,
Li plus qu'ein éléphant.	He's bigger than an elephant.

The last quatrain summed up the whole story:

Macaque la té sal nègue ein fois;	That monkey was once a dirty nigger
Li meillieur que tou blancs asteur,	He's better than all white men now.
Pasque c'est li qui fait nou' les lois,	Because tis he who makes our laws,
C'est li qui nou' Gouverneur.	Tis he who's our governor.

Nowhere else can be found as vivid a picture of the acrimonious rancor engendered by Negro rule as in the numberless "poems," letters and parodies, in the dialect, which appeared in the "Carillon" during this period. Their popularity established among white writers quite a vogue for the Gombo, which continued even after the bitterness of Reconstruction had abated. It led some of the Creole poets to compose graceful Gombo lyrics and set them to music. The best of these was an onomatopoeic ballad "Zozo Moquer"—(The Mockingbird) written by the Abbé Rouquette, long-haired, picturesque, poet-priest who administered to the spiritual needs of the Choctaw Indians. In it the sibilant softness of the dialect is sounded in all its sweetness.

Kashé dan la barbe espagnol,	Hidden in the Spanish moss,
Ki sa qui apé shanté là?	Who's that who's singing there?
Mo konnin, se pas rossignol.	I know it's not the nightingale.
Kouté so la voix! Ki silà?	Listen to its voice! Who is it?

When Rouquette, whom Thomas Moore christened the "Lamartine of America," wished to attract the attention of Lafcadio Hearn, then an editorial writer on a New Orleans paper, the good Abbé baited him with a poem in Gombo, called "Chant d'un Jeune

Créole," dedicated "A mo Zami Grek-Anglé, L. H.," and published it in the "Propagateur Catholique," where he knew Hearn would see it. It began:

To papa, li sorti péi-Anglé
Your father came from the English country
Mé to mama, li sorti île la Gréce.
But your mother came from the isle of Greece.
Pour to vini oir moin, zami Boklé
For to come to see me, friend Buckley
Li mènnin toi, avek plin politesse.
Will lead you with much politeness.

and then followed twenty stanzas saying that the poor priest would be glad to receive the great writer in his cabin at Hachunchuba and would tell him tales of other days, of the life of the woods and of Indians.

Hearn swallowed the bait just as Rouquette knew he would and the two men became great friends, but quarreled later because Hearn criticized the Abbé's spelling of the Creole dialect.

As did most Creoles, Rouquette fiercely resented George W. Cable's books as a slur upon his race and "The Grandissimes" enraged him to such a point that in 1880 he published under the nom-de-guerre of "E. Junius" a senile little pamphlet, called a "Critical Dialogue Between Aboo and Caboo." It lampooned Cable in a labored, pseudo-satiric way and ended in a scurrilous Gombo poem in which he christened Cable "Mr. Goat" on account of his beard and accused him of cohabiting with a Negress and of dancing with the notorious Voodoo queen, Marie Laveau - charges, needless to say, quite without foundation.

The good Abbé died insane, which probably explains this attack; but it is such a curious example of the patois that it should be preserved.

Savan Missié Kabri	Wise Mr. Goat[1]
Ki konin tou gri-gri,	Who knows every charm
Prosh koté For-Pagnol,	Over by Spanish Fort
Li té kouri lékol	He went to school

[1]Rouquette called Cable "Mr. Goat" on account of his beard.

Avek vié kokodri,
Ki té in Gran Zombi;
Kan soleil té koushé,
Dan ti kouin biyin kashe,
Li té sorti bayou
Pour apprande li Voudou.
Savan Missié Kabri,
Ki konin tou gri-gri,
Sé pa krivin pour frime;
Li fé li "Grandissime";
Tou moune apé parlé
Anho liv ki li fé;
Sé pa piti Missié,
Sila ki yé pélé
Savan Missié Kabri,
Ki konin tou gri-gri.
Koté Bayou Koshon,
Ou ganyin plin dijon,
Li té dansé Kongo
Avek Mari Lavo.
In soir, yé fé gran bal,
Yé limim plin fanal,
Et yé marié Kabri
Avek mamezel Zizi;
Sé té pli bel négrèsse
Té ganyin dan lespesse.
Prosh koté gran dikane,
Yé bati in kabane;
Ê yé fé plin piti,
Ki té samblé zombi,
Savan Missié Kabri,
Li konin tou gri-gri,
Li konin tou kishoze,
E li santi déroze.
Alon dansé Kongo,
Êpi crié, bravo!
Bravo pour Tasimbo!
Bravo! Bravo pour li,
Savan Missié Kabri,
Ki konin tou gri-gri;
Se pa kriven pour frime;
Li fé lé "Grandissime."

With the old alligator,
Who was a great witch-doctor;
When the sun went down,
In a well hidden corner,
He came out of the bayou
To teach him voodoo.
Wise Mr. Goat,
Who knows every charm
He's not writing for fame;
He did the "*Grandissimes*";
Everybody talked
About the book he made;
It aint a little (matter) Mister,
If they call you that
Wise Mr. Goat,
Who knows all the charms.
By Bayou Pig,
Where there was a lot of people,
He danced the Congo
With Marie Leaveau[1]
One night they had a grand ball,
They lit many torches,
And they married Goat[2]
To miss Zizi;
She was the best looking negress
There was in the (whole) race.
Near a big cane field,
They built a cabin;
And they had many little ones,
Who looked like the zombi,
Wise Mr. Goat,
He knows all the charms,
He knows everything,
And he smells like a rose.
Come, dance the Congo,
And then shout, bravo!
Bravo for Tasimbo![3]
Bravo! Bravo for him,
Wise Mr. Goat,
Who knows all the charms;
He doesn't write for fame;[4]
He did the "Grandissimes."

[1]Marie Laveau was a famous Voodoo Queen in New Orleans.

[2]The Creoles erroneously insisted that Cable advocated miscegenation in his books. This is the reason for this line.

[3]Tasimbo was a Choctaw Indian chief, notorious as a liar. A lake near New Orleans is named "Chef Menteur" (Lying Chief) in his "honor."

[4]The Creoles accused Cable of writing lies about them in order to increase the sale of his books and so make more money.

Today white men have ceased to write in Creole and only the Negroes of the older generation still speak it. Occasionly the songs may be heard in some salon, sung by a Creole lady who loves the memory of bygone days, or hummed by old colored house servants as they go about their work. Soon the Gombo will be a dead language.

Street Cries

Even the dialect street cries—those haunting musical calls that added so much to the delight of the Vieux Carré—have been forgotten. The *marchan'*[1] women, in butterfly tignons and belling calico skirts, no longer wander the *banquets*[2], arms akimbo with their wares in a wooden bowl balanced on their heads. The sweet call of the mulatress who sold cakes made of yams:

> *Bel pan patate, bel pan patate,*
> *Madame oulé ou de bel pan patate, pan patate?*

is no longer heard.

Nor does the chimney sweep in his rumpled top hat, with a coil of rope over his shoulder and a bundle of *latanier*[3] under his arm, still chant in Gombo:

Ramoné	Sweep
la chiminée!	the chimney!
C'est li tems, oui,	Its time, yes,
C'est l'hiver, oui.	Its winter, yes.
Ramoné ci,	Sweep here,
Ramoné la,	Sweep there,
Ramoné li	Sweep it,
de haut en bas.	from top to bottom.
Ramoné!	Sweep!

Instead he rattles the windows with:

> *Rami, rami, rami, ramineau,*[4]
> *here's de chim-il-lo-o sweeper!*

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[1]From the French word "*marchande,*" a female street peddler.
[2]Sidewalk—from French word *banquette*, a footway.
[3]The leaves of a miniature palm.
[4]A queer Negro transformation of French word *ramoneur*, a chimney sweep.

Chunka lunka chunka lunka chunka lou ou ou,
here's de chim-il-lo-o sweeper!
Ramineau!! Ramineau!!!!!!!!

The chimney sweep's cacophony is the last of the street cries that retain any of the Gombo words. All the other colored vendors of today chant entirely in English. Even the polite old glazier has forsaken the dialect and now lets the world know that he replaces broken window glass by calling:

Panes put in ladies! Panes put in ladies!

—or at least he did, until an over-punctilious police made him stop.

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