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Zulu Crewe Celebrates 100th Anniversary

Chandra R. Thomas
Contributor to The Root
Wednesday, February 25, 2009; 12:00 PM

"This Mardi Gras, as my hometown continues to recover from the devastation of Katrina, we have another reason to rejoice. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Zulu krewe parading through the streets of New Orleans. Zulu is the 'social aid and pleasure club' that hosts the first and largest African-American-centered parade in New Orleans. When black people were kept out of the main Mardi Gras celebration, the Zulus decided to form a black 'krewe' (a formal name for a Mardi Gras club) of their own... Some of my best memories are of Mardi Gras mornings, when my family members, young and old, would gather at the crack of dawn to stake out a good spot along the Zulu parade route. Along with the typical parade baubles, the decorated coconut remains the coveted catch of the day at the Zulu parade. It has become such a desirable souvenir that it was officially copyrighted in 2001."

Journalist and New Orleans native **Chandra R. Thomas** was online **Wednesday, February 25** to discuss her article for The Root, "[More than Beads, Booze and Boobs](#)," and talk about the Mardi Gras traditions that don't involve "girls gone wild." She also talked about her [interview with Ms. Dupre](#) of the Tom Joyner Morning Show, a fellow Louisianan.

A transcript follows.

Chandra R. Thomas: Hi. This is Chandra R. Thomas, author of the Mardi Gras Noir series on The Root. I am happy to answer your questions.

Mardi Gras "Indians": In one of the photos in your gallery, you mention that "legend has it" that slaves dressed up as Native Americans to get around bans on blacks participating in the parade. Do you think this is just legend or is it really true?

Chandra R. Thomas: I had the opportunity last week to speak with the family members of "Tootie" Montana, the late leader of one of the best known tribes, and he confirmed for me that was true. They also explained to me the connection between the Indians and African-Americans. As you may recall, it was illegal for African slaves to congregate during those times. However I learned from the Montanas that on Sundays the Indians and African slaves were allowed to gather in a part of the French Quarter known as Congo Square to dance together. Many slaves earned money from their performances to buy their freedom. How cool is that?!

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New Orleans, After Katrina: Chandra, are your relatives still living in New Orleans? I have

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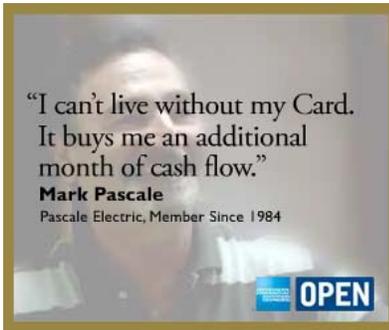
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read that so many African American families have not come back yet, does this make you concerned about the future for traditions like those you write about?

Chandra R. Thomas: My family members have slowly trickled back to New Orleans over these years. Most of the delay has to do with a housing shortage. People needed places to stay while they were getting their housing funds and then they had to wait for their homes to be rebuilt. Most of my family members have their homes rebuilt so they are back. My grandmother lived with me for two full years after the storm. Unfortunately she

got sick right before she was to return home for a first look at her rebuilt home. My great aunt who is nearly 90 has opted to stay in Atlanta. It's much safer and she has more access to resources. Housing is a major problem for many people now. New Orleans used to be a cheap place to live if you did not have a lot of money. Now a place that used to go for \$500 a month is more like \$1,200! If you are interested in learning more, pick up the current issue of *The American Prospect Magazine*. They just did a whole Gulf Coast update issue. It is very informative.

washingtonpost.com: [Housing New Orleans: Still a Work in Progress](#) by Chandra R. Thomas (*The American Prospect*)

Louisiana: I went to Mardi Gras once. I was 20. It was freezing, and New Orleans was a disgusting, filthy place with waist-high garbage lined up along the sidewalks and people urinating in the street. And it wasn't only the young women flashing their breasts for those 10 cent beads. It was old flabby women, heavy women, and occasionally a male would drop his pants. Gross. I have no desire to go back, now that I'm 30 and stationed just 4 hours from there. I've since been to New Orleans and have seen it in its regular state and it's much nicer than my first impression.

HOWEVER... with that said, I can say I see it in a different light now. I've been stationed in Louisiana for a little over a year and Mardi Gras is a huge thing around here. They have little parades at the school here on Fort Polk for the kids. I think last year they got the day off too. Houses are decorated with purple, gold, and green wreaths or banners.

It seems the Mardi Gras celebrated today has been morphed into something so far off from what it started from that it's vaguely recognizable. I know in other Louisiana cities it's not like it is in New Orleans. But what I still don't understand about the whole gig is why anybody who was not Catholic (or anyone who didn't plan on fasting) would celebrate it.

Chandra R. Thomas: I'm glad your impression has changed a bit. Mardi Gras is really what you make it. A lot of entities like *Girls Gone Wild* and MTV have promoted one side of it, but that's such a small part of it. I have been experiencing my first Mardi Gras since Katrina and it has been so uplifting to me. For the natives it is about family time, just like people view Christmas. I had the opportunity to be in the Zulu parade yesterday. It was my first time riding on a float. Keep in mind that the Zulu parade, unlike the others, also goes through "the hood." I can't even explain to you all the cute babies and families I saw hanging out together, cooking out and having fun. That's what I want to do with this series, is let people know that there is another side to Mardi Gras. Those people who act crazy in the streets are mostly tourists who came here to get drunk and act crazy because they cannot do that at home! You should have seen the look on those people's faces - black and white - when they caught a 5 cent bead. It's a fun game and it makes you a kid again. That is why more than a million people cram into this tiny city - it's all about fun. Whatever you define that to be!

Dorchester, Mass.: Ever wonder why the Zulu Coconuts are silver, gold, and black? They used to be just black. One year, my dad, who was a member of Zulu, ran out of gold paint. We, his work crew (alias his children) were sent to look for paint in his shed. We located a can of silver paint and painted some coconuts silver before that can ran out. Then daddy sent us back to the shed to get all of his left over paint. The year was 1976, the bicentennial of this country so we painted a few coconuts red, white and blue. There were black coconuts with white paint and glitter. Finally, there were a few hideous orange ones too. The Zulus then made a rule as to what colors official coconuts could be painted by the membership.

They had to head off anarchy since every member had a load of old paint they could use to paint their coconuts. Daddy went with the program -- his old paint was gone anyway.

Chandra R. Thomas: Thanks for that insight. I was in the Zulu parade yesterday and it was my first time on a float. I have been called a pretty good writer from time to time, but I am not sure that I can convey how important getting a souvenir decorated Zulu coconut is to people here. If you check out the yearlong Zulu exhibit going on at the museum here in New Orleans, you will get some major insight. However what impressed me most was when our guide, Zulu historian Clarence Becknell (sp?) explained that the coconut was really only used because the Zulu members were just working class folks who could not afford the pricey glass beads that the white organizations were throwing in the parades. The coconuts were originally thrown in their original hairy state, then later they were shaved and decorated. Even the Zulu costume, black/white face, Afro wig and grass skirt, ballerina tights, were created out of what members could afford. This instilled such pride in me. Why? Because I think it is so impressive how we, as African-Americans, always seems to make "something out of nothing." What others consider worthless we make stylish. I wish that side of African-Americans was promoted more. Look at our influence on fashion!

Kenner, La.: I really enjoyed the Q and A with Ms. Dupre. I have two questions about that. 1) How was her party this year? and 2) Could you talk a little bit more about segregation in New Orleans? Is Ms. Dupre the only black person there in her neighborhood? Is it more mixed in general now?

Chandra R. Thomas: I was in the Zulu parade yesterday and that ate up most of our day so I did not make the party. However, based on what she told us beforehand it sounded like it was phenomenal. She makes all of the food and does not cater any of it. WOW! Ms. Dupre was great and very open and friendly.

As for segregation, Ms. Dupre said it best when she told me New Orleans has always been "subtly segregated." It is so true. As a kid I was oblivious to all of this. However, as an adult I have since learned that this is so true. In New Orleans there is an illusion of unity -- unified to party -- but New Orleans is in the South. Don't forget that. Even where you physically stand to watch the parades tends to be dictated largely by your race. My family members were watching the parades in black neighborhoods yesterday. They were not standing on predominately white St. Charles Avenue.

Where Ms. Dupre lives is still a predominantly white neighborhood. During this trip a group of us visited the Hubbard Mansion, which is a black-owned bed & breakfast on St. Charles Avenue uptown right on the streetcar line. The owners told us that they had to veil their identity (race) through a corporation to buy the land to build their place. Mr. Hubbard says previous purchase deals had fallen through when the sellers found out that he was black. They had to use a corporation name to buy the property. On closing day, Mr. Hubbard walked in at the last second and signed the papers before the deal could be off. He says there may be three other people of color who own in his area. Segregation is very real here, especially since Katrina. There seems to be a concerted effort to keep the poor from returning.

Well now I have to ask...: ... how did you get invited to ride in the Zulu parade? Sounds like fun!

Chandra R. Thomas: Most people who ride in the parades are members of the organization who hosts the parade. However, now many of the organizations offer a package where you can pay to be on a float. For Zulu, it's about \$1,200 or \$1,500 and that includes your costume and "throws" (the stuff you throw from the float). All I can tell you is that it is a priceless experience. It is so much fun! Your float even has its own deejay! I had such a great time. It would be great to get a group of friends together and do it!

Atlanta, Ga.: Chandra, I'm so glad you decided to do this story, and I'm glad The Root and the Washington Post are providing a venue to educate the general public on Mardi Gras "Noir". As a native New Orleanian now living in Atlanta, I constantly have to preach the real meaning of Mardi Gras to locals, and why it's so important to continue the tradition. Most people do not get to see how locals celebrate with their families, and are turned off by what they see in the media.

I could not attend Mardi Gras this year but I'm looking forward to next year's celebration. Thanks again for sharing your experience with the rest of us.

Chandra R. Thomas: Thanks. I totally "feel" you. I spend a lot of time doing the same thing. That's why I am so honored that The Root believed in my story and agreed to publish it. As you know, we New Orleanians take this very seriously. I am tired of the other side dominating coverage. As you may have seen in my photo gallery, it is my biggest privilege to bring a friend with me and indoctrinate them into my New Orleans. Just to show you how

much the negative gets portrayed. One year I had a friend from Alabama back out of a long-planned Mardi Gras trip (the day of - mind you) because her boyfriend, a minister, said he didn't want her in that madness. I was so hurt because she never got to see the real deal. All I can say is don't believe the hype. We should connect since you're a Nawlins native in Atlanta. Check out my discussion group, www.talkblack.net.

Charlottesville, Va.: Are there any traditions for Ash Wednesday (other than going to church)?

Chandra R. Thomas: My grandmother was a die-hard Catholic and I went to Catholic school for 8 plus years, so I will be in trouble for not remembering more. All I remember is going to church, getting ashes smeared on your forehead. Another thing is we cannot eat meat. I was just in a restaurant eating breakfast and I had to change my order because my mom called me on my cell to remind me not to eat meat. It's a holy day of obligation.

Dallas, TX: Ms. Thomas,

While I agree that Mardi Gras is a family event, there is crime. Two thugs shot up 6 people during one of the parades either yesterday or on Lundi Gras. One of those thugs was already a convicted felon at age 18. Where was their African American pride for the parades and their ancestor's contributions to the annual festivities?

Chandra R. Thomas: People need to realize that New Orleans is a major city. In big cities there is crime. When you think about an extra million plus people filing into a city for an extended weekend something is going to happen. Also when you add in alcohol it's even more. When you think about how much COULD go wrong that doesn't it helps you keep it in perspective.

Even the group that I was hanging with, people from NYC and Miami, kept commenting on how impressed they were with how "well-behaved" everyone is. More than likely the person who shot up the crowd is an uneducated thug who would have shot up a group of people regardless of whether it was Mardi Gras day or not. Katrina exposed the ugly underbelly of the city. There's a lack of education and economic opportunity that creates a crime culture for a segment of the city. If New Orleans improved its education system a lot of the crime would diminish. Add in an economic crisis and you have some problems. I feel for the families of the shooting victims though. You should not be at a parade and fall victim like that.

New Orleans, La.: How do you think the spate of shootings during parades and other festivities over the past couple years will impact future Mardi Gras seasons?

Chandra R. Thomas: While I was riding in the float yesterday, a native New Orleanian said "even if nobody came, we'd still do it." She was referring to Mardi Gras and the parades. For natives, it won't change a thing. People here live for Mardi Gras, it's a whole culture. The shootings will likely have some impact on tourists, but most people who come for Mardi Gras come back again and again.

Washington, D.C. : Chandra: I really wanted to go to Mardi Gras this year but missed it. How was the celebration this year? Was it back to historic levels? What was new about the festivities this year?

Chandra R. Thomas: It was GREAT! The weather was perfect and the crowds were DEEP! I thought I was at Obama's inauguration! LOL! I heard the newscaster say that it was definitely the best post-Katrina Mardi Gras and up there with one of the best ever. Being on a float during the Zulu parade gave me a bird's eye view and I tell you it was PACKED! People were out in full effect. I also think as more people's homes are rebuilt more people are back in the city. Honestly, if you stayed in the tourist-dominated areas you could not even tell that Katrina ever happened. It's good to see a city with such heart be so vibrant again. People honestly have no idea of how this Katrina thing is tearing people down. Most people are STILL dealing with so much - but for one day they pause and forget it all and have fun! That's what make Mardi Gras in New Orleans so great!

Philadelphia, Pa.: When I was at the Mardi Gras Museum, there were some brief references to traditions in part of Louisiana which sounded a bit like "guys gone wild." If I understood this correctly, guys approach females and ask for an egg or some prize or else they spank the female with a whip. I presume this is all in good fun, or are there instances of unwilling

victims in all that? What is the basis behind a tradition which appears violent to outsiders?

Chandra R. Thomas: I met an Associated Press writer yesterday and she was on the Zulu float with us writing a story for her job. She is a native and she says the whole "flashing" thing started from bar owners in the French Quarters hiring strippers to stand on the balconies and flash people on the street below. In short, it was a marketing ploy that picked up steam. That was the first I'd heard of it, then Girls Gone Wild took it to new heights.

I just think when people drink -- and drinking is a HUGE part of Mardi Gras for a lot of people -- then you get what you get. Many people drink and act crazy and that's what I think it stems from. Honestly, most of what goes on is in good fun. I think a lot of people come into town and let their guard down and that can be problematic. Yes there is dancing and drinking in the streets. YES it is a big party, but you cannot forget that you are in a MAJOR CITY. I think you should conduct yourself like you would in NYC or Chicago. I think because New Orleans feels so small, people forget.

Washington, D.C.: I was in New Orleans for Valentine's Day weekend and noticed something that maybe you would be able to help me understand. I saw various depictions of "Mammy" in stores in the French Quarter and in the French Market and not really sure what to make of it. Does the history in New Orleans represent the figure of "Mammy" as something positive in the black community or is it something we as black people should be offended of seeing sold in the city?

Chandra R. Thomas: I'm not aware of any specific connotation to Mammy as it relates to New Orleans, but I think just like anywhere these antiquated images of black people has its complications. I know black people who collect Mammy memorabilia while others who turn their nose up to the whole thing. I think it's all in your perception of it.

Heck, for the Zulu parade yesterday I was dressed in black/white face, an Afro wig and a grass skirt. Even as a native I was a bit freaked out by that, but once I learned more about the historic roots of it all at the Zulu exhibit in the museum I realized that it wasn't about my perception and personal bias, it's about what it means to Zulu and its members.

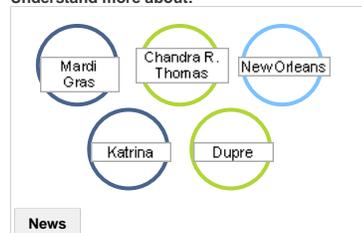
In New Orleans the Zulu organization has status because it was always "our parade" and our thing. They're still the only parade that goes through the hood. Once I took that attitude I was able to have fun with the experience.

As for Mammy, I think she is what you make of her. If the sight of her makes you cringe then she is not for you. If you look at it her as an historic representation of black women then maybe it can work for you. Just think of how our image has evolved. Can you say MICHELLE OBAMA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Chandra R. Thomas: I thoroughly enjoyed answering your questions this afternoon. Please continue to check The Root for my Mardi Gras 2009 wrap-up column. And for the rest of the day remember our motto in New Orleans "laissez les bons temps rouler" LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL!

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