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More Than Beads, Booze and Boobs

Forget Girls Gone Wild. This Mardi Gras, a New Orleans native celebrates the 100th anniversary of the black Zulu Krewe.

By: Chandra R. Thomas | Posted: February 23, 2009 at 10:26 AM

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There is admittedly a *Girls Gone Wild* element to Mardi Gras. You know, the intoxicated young women raising their shirts for beads and engaging in salacious sexual activity on the streets. That



may be so for many tourists, but for natives like my family, Mardi Gras is a family-bonding time: cooking out and dancing to the bands marching by, all the while screaming for the beads and other trinkets thrown from the vibrantly decorated floats. I have never once seen anyone in my family flash their assets, to claim worthless, plastic jewelry.

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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. This year, the Louisiana State Museum joined forces with Zulu to [present From Tramps to Kings: 100 Years of Zulu, a new yearlong exhibit](#) that explores the origins, unique traditions, and cultural and civic contributions of the organization from 1909 to the present.

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.

Long before an invite to President Obama's inaugural ball was the hot ticket, black New Orleanians coveted invitations to the formal Zulu ball, which takes place the Friday night before the Fat Tuesday festivities get underway. At one time, it was the only carnival ball that blacks could attend. It is an awesome sight seeing more than 15,000 black folks in elegant floor-length gowns and pristine tuxes.

The ball typically runs into the wee hours and includes a live concert with some of the music industry's hottest stars, but the highlight of the night is when the brass band emerges and the crowd—with umbrellas and handkerchiefs in hand—erupts into the [traditional second line dance](#).

Now that's an authentic New Orleans moment.

Today, the Zulus are no longer relegated exclusively to the "back streets" of predominantly black neighborhoods. Zulu follows the Rex parade, which crowns the official king of Mardi Gras, down St. Charles

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Avenue and culminates with a traditional toast in front of the old city hall, now known as Gallier Hall.

And, of course, no reflections on black Mardi Gras would be complete without the "Indians," a group of African Americans who parade around mostly black neighborhoods in elaborate handmade regalia modeled after Native-American ceremonial dress. They always seem to take great pride in their African roots as they, with their belled wrist and ankle bands, launch into their Afro-Caribbean inspired jams with congas and tambourines. Legend has it that this tradition was [created when black slaves banned from joining in Mardi Gras revelries in the Gulf Region](#) "masked" themselves as Native Americans to participate. We will get our party on by any means necessary, right?

Just as the image of America is undergoing a transformation of sorts with the ushering in of a new presidential administration, it is my dream that the image of Mardi Gras, too, will undergo a major makeover. I want the world to know that African Americans have had a major hand in shaping Mardi Gras traditions in New Orleans, and that it is about more than beads, booze and breasts. Please check out my [photo album of past celebrations of my family and the Zulu krewes](#). It is up to us to ensure that our story no longer gets lost in the madness of it all. Come down and check it out for yourself. And bring your kids, too, because believe it or not Mardi Gras truly is a family affair!

Chandra R. Thomas is an award-winning Atlanta-based journalist. She is the co-founder of an African-American discussion group, TalkBLACK.

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I have been to Mardi Gras

I have been to Mardi Gras twice and I had a lot of fun without having to lift my shirt. It's all what you make it. Also I loved the article Chandra.

Huenita

Posted: Tuesday, February 24, 2009

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I love it

Mardi Gras it is what it is...It's what we thought it was...A PARTY...A CELEBRATION, now let's go enjoy...

Stonewall J

Posted: Monday, February 23, 2009

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I don't get it, but I kinda want to

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 it's regular state and it's much nicer than my first impression.

Hannibal Schlechter

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.

Posted: Monday, February 23, 2009

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i can relate

i remember going to mardi gras as a kid. i can taste the king cake now! with the little baby in it!

erin.evans

Posted: Monday, February 23, 2009

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