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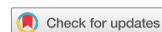
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Zulu: a transnational history of a New Orleans Mardi Gras krewe

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transnational ties, both real and imagined, between New Orleans and South Africa through the lens of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, an African American Mardi Gras krewe founded in 1909 and based on the popular conception of the South African Zulu of the era. While the organization's performance of Zulu remained largely fixed, the world around it altered significantly, leading to changing outsider perceptions – and criticism – of the club. I examine how this relationship evolved over time, starting with the genesis of the organization, and how the Zulu krewe interacted with or was disconnected from the links between the two locations. As such, this work explores two parallel strands: the increasing, tangible ties between the Crescent City and South Africa – particularly economic trade – and the performance of Zulu.

KEYWORDS

New Orleans; South Africa;
Zulu; Mardi Gras

Introduction

Tuesday 28 February 2006 marked a moment of both celebration and memorial in New Orleans. That Mardi Gras season commemorated the Gulf Coast region's recent tragic events. Hurricane Katrina had devastated New Orleans, flooding 80% of the city, killing over 1100 residents, and turning hundreds of thousands into refugees scattered over 48 states. For many, holding carnival that year stood as a sign of the city's resilience.

For decades, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club's parade marked the start of Fat Tuesday. Started in 1909 as the first African American Mardi Gras krewe, Zulu had been assailed by Civil Rights and black civic leaders from the 1940s through the late 1960s for their performance and use of blackface. Since the 1970s, though, many in the city held up Zulu's parade as a tradition. Club president Charles Hamilton, Jr. argued Zulu's 2006 parade was a “way to help the city heal.”¹ Yet, Zulu's participation remained uncertain in the wake of the disaster. Many of the members resided in New Orleans East and the Lower Ninth Ward, one of the city's hardest hit areas, and eleven individuals affiliated with the club had died, in addition to 250 others displaced and left homeless.²

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¹“Marching On,” *Times-Picayune*, February 26, 2006.

²“Zulu Dancers for Mardi Gras,” *News 24*, February 22, 2006.

Although faced with the difficulty of assembling the various members, the Zulu Club not only held their annual parade, but fulfilled a 20-year quest to include ethnic Zulus from South Africa, first attempted in 1986 but abandoned due to criticism during the boycotts and protests of the apartheid South African state. As described by the *New Orleans Times Picayune*, these 20 “authentic Zulu warriors, dressed in traditional garb and wielding spears and shields” led Zulu’s parade that morning.³ Mardi Gras float designer Blaine Kerne had traveled to South Africa on personal expense to meet with and ask South African Zulus to march in the parade. The criticism of Kerne’s 1986 effort was largely forgotten and instead participants in both countries celebrated the incorporation of representatives of the Zulu ethnic group. Dr. Felicia M. Suttle, President of South African Tourism USA, proclaimed: “This is a Historic moment for New Orleans Culture ... It’s truly a great moment for the New Orleans-South African Connection.”⁴

Despite the enthusiastic response to the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club’s participation in the first post-Katrina Mardi Gras, the krewe remains a source of criticism and a puzzlement to contemporary outsiders. The organization continues to perform as “Zulu” warriors, dressing in grass skirts and elaborate headgear, carrying spears and shields, being led by King Zulu, and – most controversially – using blackface, a potentially shocking experience for outside spectators.

This staging has continued largely unaltered since their origin in 1909, despite an increasingly changing world. Their portrayal is based on a multi-layered cultural construction of the “Zulu warrior,” with the impetus for the krewe a vaudeville show group members witnessed that year. Thus, the organization was inspired by and joined the popular practice of minstrelsy. However, the roots of the krewe’s act run deeper than minstrelsy and vaudeville. The performance they witnessed in 1909 was heavily influenced by newspaper accounts of South African Zulus fighting in the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War, and exhibitions of South African Zulus and impersonators, another popular form of entertainment in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America.

This paper examines Zulu’s fixed performance and the changing world around it. It focuses on a New Orleans–South Africa connection that dates back to the late nineteenth century. It examines how this relationship evolved over time, starting with the genesis of the organization, and how the Zulu krewe interacted with or was disconnected from the links between the two locations. This work explores two parallel strands: the increasing, tangible ties between the Crescent City and South Africa – particularly economic trade – and the performance of Zulu.

This article focuses on these key moments where the krewe and the more tangible connections between New Orleans and South Africa intersected. This paper draws together several separate approaches on the history of the krewe, Mardi Gras, New Orleans, and transnational history. Works on Mardi Gras rarely if at all employ a transnational perspective. Instead, historians of Mardi Gras have largely furthered a New Orleans “exceptional narrative” that frames the city as unique or distinct from other locations in the United States; often compared to European cities, or perhaps situated in Caribbean context, but with little exploration of the link to Africa.⁵ While the krewe started in 1909 in New Orleans, a

³Ray Koneig, “African Zulu Warriors to Lead Off New Orleans Parade,” *Times Picayune*, February 8, 2006.

⁴“South African Zulu Warriors Make Historic Trip to Mardi Gras,” *PR Newswire*, February 25, 2006.

⁵See, for example, Vidal, *Louisiana*; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; and Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans*.

transnational approach that explores the group's and New Orleans's ties to the Zulus of South Africa and South Africa in general needs to be incorporated to expand the scope beyond the Crescent City to better understand the krewe's influences and outsiders' interpretations, and the larger connections between New Orleans and South Africa.⁶

As such, this article contributes to the literature on the transnational link between the United State and South Africa, particularly the cultural connections – much of which has focused on the impact of American music and other cultural mediums on South Africa – as well as commercial links.⁷ My work also adds to the literature on the image of Africans. As argued by historian Philip Curtin, the Anglo image of Africans has largely been stereotypical, changing over time with altering European attitudes toward Africa, and based upon supposed primary sources like western traveler and missionary accounts of Africa and Africans.⁸ Similarly, Russell Martin posited that European administrators and professionals attempting to push a political or ideological agenda like the justification of imperialism also shaped the popular image of Africans.⁹ Chief of the Zulus from 1816 to 1828, Shaka has loomed large in the shaping of the Anglo image of the African, serving as a symbol of military prowess, power, and tyranny.¹⁰ While the image of Shaka too has been often shaped by biased white views of the ruler, Carolyn Hamilton asserted that scholars should also examine the influence of native Africans on the white “inventions and reinventions” of Shaka. This native influence and contestation – including within the Zulu community over how Shaka should be understood – helped set the limits on the political use of the image of Shaka.¹¹ While this work does not address Shaka, his influence on the popular image of Zulus, and Africans in general, is substantial.

Performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enacted the stereotypical image of the African on European and American stages through the displaying of (real or fake) African showmen, helping to shape the western perception of the African.¹² In New Orleans, a complicated and controversial staging of the Zulu appeared in 1909 and continues to this day. The following sections trace that performance situated in changing ties between the city and South Africa, seeking to understand how working class African Americans in New Orleans used their limited direct knowledge, supplemented by popular conceptions of Zulus as expressed in early twentieth century stage performances, to construct their own image and portrayal of Zulu; how audience interpretations of the performance changed over time, and often differed from the members' own stated purpose; and how and why the krewe for decades claimed to be putting on an “African performance” but then abandoned the assertion. Despite this change, the links to South Africa have continued to impact the krewe. This work further counters the contention of many supporters and scholars that the krewe started as an attempt to parody white krewes like Rex or white stereotypes of African

⁶See Saunders, “Cape Town and New Orleans.”

⁷On cultural ties, see Ballantine, *Marabi Nights*; Coplan, *In Township Tonight*; Fleming and Falola, *Music, Performance, and African Identities*; Mgbako, “My Blackness is the Beauty of this Land”; Magubane, “Globalization and Gangster Rap”; Magubane, “The Impact of African American Cultural Practices on South Africa”; Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood*; Robolin, *Grounds of Engagement*; Rosenberg, “Youth, Popular Culture, and Identity”; *Safundi* Volume 13, Issues 3–4; and Thelwell, “Towards a Modernizing Hybridity.” On commercial links, see Campbell, “The Americanization of South Africa”; and Hull, *American Enterprise in South Africa*.

⁸Curtin, *The Image of Africa*.

⁹Martin, “British Images of the Zulu.”

¹⁰See, for example Burness, *Shaka*; and Wylie, *Myth of Iron*.

¹¹Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, 16.

¹²Lindfors, *Africans on Stage*.

Americans. Instead, this is the story of a group of black New Orleanians who found a way to participate in what was supposed to be the white-only celebration of Carnival, and found an inspiration for their act on the vaudeville stage and in the larger popular ideas about the ethnic Zulus of South Africa.

Background and origin of the krewe

In turn of the century New Orleans, a number of ward clubs made up of working class African Americans from a particular district in the city formed as social and benevolent associations. In 1901, one group known as “The Tramps” reportedly paraded for the first time during Mardi Gras, marching only in black neighborhoods as they were forbidden to parade in white sections of the city. In line with their name, the group wore costumes of white shirts, ragged pants, and straw hats.¹³ According to most sources, in 1909 the Tramps attended a show at the Elysian Theater in the Pythian Temple by a vaudeville act known as the Southern Smart Set. The performance, entitled “The Star of Zanzibar,” included an act entitled “There Never Was or Will be a King Like Me,” featuring a Zulu king and warriors.¹⁴ In 1956, Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure president Jim Russell told the *Pittsburgh Courier* – presumably based on oral tradition – that the actors in 1909 performed in blackface with white rings around the eyes, noses, and mouth; mossy wigs; and grass skirts.¹⁵ These elements became signature – and controversial – elements of the Tramps’s own performance of Zulu during Mardi Gras parades.

Several important elements should be noted. First, the Tramps based their performance of Zulu on a vaudeville act. Second, the vaudeville players were African American actors performing at an African American entertainment venue. Third, the black troupe wore blackface.

Vaudeville and minstrel shows were a popular form of entertainment in the period.¹⁶ These acts often included whites and African Americans in blackface. Black performance in blackface largely followed white stereotypes of African Americans as inept, lazy, and unintelligent. Also common in the era, African Americans performed white stereotypes of Africans for primarily white audiences. As Nicholas Sammond argues, this depiction of the Africans allowed black actors to create a separation between themselves and the “savage” Africans.¹⁷ Vaudeville performances of the Zulu adhered to this script, focusing on the trope of the wild, uncivilized Zulu warrior, often portrayed in blackface and wearing a grass skirt and large nose ring. The Zulu krewe of New Orleans employed this model for their Mardi Gras parades.

The staging of Zulus extended far beyond vaudeville, with Zulus a popular feature in numerous entertainment mediums following the widespread coverage of the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War, a conflict initiated due to British desire for territory in Zululand and their interest in destroying the Zulu Kingdom as a threat to British hegemony. The Zulus are a part of the Nguni ethnic group that migrated from the Congo River Basin to what is now known as Kwazulu-Natal in the sixteenth century. Originally a pastoral society of cattle herders and

¹³Edward J.H. Sorrell, “Zulu Club Selects Trainer of Prizefighters as Its 42nd King,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 11, 1956.

¹⁴Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right*, 20; Kinser, *Carnival American Style*, 223; and Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 19.

¹⁵Sorrell, “Zulu Club Selects Trainer.”

¹⁶Johnson, *Burnt Cork*; and Taylor and Austin, *Darkest America*.

¹⁷Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*.

grain farmers, the clan was largely comprised of individual family groups. It is unknown when the group began to think of or refer to themselves as “Zulu.”¹⁸ In the late eighteenth century, consolidation began under increasingly more powerful chiefs. Chief from 1816 to 1828, Shaka used a reorganized military and diplomacy to conquer numerous, neighboring chiefdoms, forming a unified Zulu nation.¹⁹ Feared for their military prowess, the Zulu nation controlled the largest empire in Southeastern Africa. Under subsequent chiefs, contact and treaties with the British and Boers weakened the Zulu position. Increasing British attempts to control Zululand fueled border disputes and attempts to portray the Zulus under King Cetshwayo as a threat. In December 1878, a British delegation demanded the remand of Zulus accused of murder, and the dismantling of the Zulu military. Cetshwayo refused to respond and the British invaded Zululand in January 1879.²⁰

Newspapers throughout the world, including New Orleans, covered the war. For example, *The New Orleans Daily Democrat* alone ran 189 articles on the conflict in a 14-month period and noted that initial Zulu victories – significant blows to British prestige and notions of superiority – “aroused a public interest in Zululand,” of which “comparatively little is known.”²¹ Newspaper articles fed white New Orleanians’ appetite, describing the Zulus’ land, villages, and way of life, often based on the accounts of missionaries dating back until at least the 1840s. Visitors remembered traveling through the African “bush,” filled with “wild beasts,” and tall trees blocking out the sun; entering Zulu “kraals,” “a conglomeration of huts and cattle pens which does duty for a town or village”; and meeting chiefs described as “tyrants,” reminiscent of Egyptian pharaohs.²² Echoing these beliefs, the articles on the Anglo-Zulu War fed into the established stereotype of a jungle-filled Africa and the Zulus as proficient but backwards warriors. Writers noted how all young Zulu males were taught to be warriors at an early age; described them as “well-armed, fairly disciplined, and undoubtedly brave and blood-thirsty”;²³ and seemingly praised their repeated victories over the British, detailing the British troops “overwhelming” defeats at the hands of their “dangerous enemy.”²⁴ The articles largely followed racial stereotypes of Africans as strong but lacking intelligence; brave but not strategic; the exoticized other; a “powerful, well-built race, capable of endurance”; and a group of “savages” and “barbarians” who won victories due to their swarming numbers and willingness to sacrifice themselves, not because of military ingenuity.²⁵

Journalists applied the same treatment to Cetshwayo, the Zulu king and the subject of great media attention: “During the past month the name of Cetywayo [*sic*] has become nearly as familiar as that of Sitting Bull.”²⁶ Writers described Cetshwayo as the “most powerful African monarch south of the Equator.”²⁷ Accounts of Cetshwayo primarily focused on two attributes: bravery and opulence. Depicted as symbolic of the Zulu warrior in general,

¹⁸Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, 14.

¹⁹Eldredge, *The Creation of the Zulu Kingdom*, 2.

²⁰Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom*; and LaBand, *Zulu Warriors*.

²¹“The Land of the Zulus,” *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, February 23, 1879.

²²“Zulu Weapons,” *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, March 29, 1879; and “Scenes in Zululand,” *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, March 22, 1879.

²³“Supplement,” *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, January 28, 1879.

²⁴*The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, February 12, 1879.

²⁵“The Zulus,” *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, February 15, 1879, and “England,” *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, May 03, 1879.

²⁶“Cetewayo,” *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, March 29, 1879.

²⁷“The Zulus,” *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, February 15, 1879.

reporters labeled Cetshwayo as “merciless as he is bloodthirsty. I have known him to kill 50 women and children to feed his golden eagles. As brave as a lion, he will fight until he dies.”²⁸ Beyond his physicality, journalists harped on the ruler’s lavishness: trees “gaudily covered in ornaments”; the chief surrounded by attendants in “jeweled uniforms,” his royal tent decorated with “gold vessels,” a floor covered in animal pelts, “grotesque paintings attached to the sides of the tent with rough frames of pure gold,” and a lavish throne “encrusted with diamonds,” all designed to display his “power, wealth, liberality.”²⁹ Others claimed Cetshwayo consulted with witch doctors to deal with his enemies.³⁰

Newspaper coverage and cultural representations of the Zulu pervaded the imagination of white New Orleanians so much so that the term “Zulu” became popular in the city’s lingo, part of a larger Anglophone use. Zulu became a metaphor for New Orleanian concepts of ignorance – “It was as useless to a New York City directory would be to a Zulu”;³¹ was often used to describe athletes, like a boxer after he had won a title fight – “the most peaceful of pacifists would look like a wild-eyed, blood-thirsty Zulu on the warrior compared to Willard”;³² or a “wild” pitcher: “Buck Weaver opened against the Vols, and for seven innings, Buck though as wild as a Zulu, was stingy with his hits.”³³ Other writers employed the terms to describe bloodthirsty individuals – “Nor is he better pleased with Fabre’s callousness towards the suffering of caterpillars, or his Zulu-like enthusiasm at how they are eaten by that wasp.”³⁴

These examples demonstrated that both journalists and readers understood and employed the cultural construction of the Zulu as a fierce and wild warrior in everyday conversation, reflecting the earlier coverage of the Anglo-Zulu War. Writers also utilized another trope about Zulus – the opulence of the Zulu chiefs. Describing a particularly garish outfit, *Colliers* detailed a “short stocky woman in a Directoire satin of a bright yellow hue and a black hat ornamented as generously as a Zulu war-bonnet.”³⁵ A correspondent chronicling Washington society elites wrote that

the Zulu chieftain who displays the beauties of a new and elaborate design of red and blue tattoo on a black hide, could not demand more eager and servile adulation than this purveyor of journalistic snobbery bestows upon the personal character of society people in Washington.³⁶

Although perhaps not universal, and probably tending to be better understood by white middle and upper class individuals that regularly consumed media, these writings capture the popular perception of what it meant to be a Zulu, what being Zulu signified: a gaudy, simple-minded, backwards but brave and violent warrior. Stage performances of Zulu warriors, both of ethnic South African Zulus brought to America after the Anglo-Zulu war and the costumed depictions by black or white actors in blackface, followed this popular understanding. William Hunt first brought a group marketed as ethnic Zulus to the US in 1881, after first “exhibiting” them in London in 1879. The ensemble, called “Farini’s Friendly

²⁸*The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, March 21, 1879.

²⁹“Narrative of a Visit to the Zulu Country,” *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, February 26, 1879.

³⁰*The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, April 21, 1878.

³¹“Views of the by the Sporting Editor Army Boxing Rules Are the Best Yet,” *Times-Picayune*, February 18, 1918.

³²“Miscellaneous,” *The Times-Picayune*, March 3, 1918.

³³“Pop Boy Smith Hits Better Than Hurls,” *Times-Picayune*, May 18, 1918.

³⁴“Magazines Of The Month Reviewed And Appraised Current Issues of Popular Periodicals of General Interest,” *Times-Picayune*, March 30, 1919.

³⁵*Colliers*, Volume 44, 1909, Page 20.

³⁶“Social Snobbery at Washington,” *The New Orleans Bulletin*, January 16, 1875.

Zulus,” debuted in New York City at Bunnell’s Museum and became a popular attraction.³⁷ The men dressed in warrior garb and performed war dances for delighted audiences. One member and his American wife toured the South in 1881–1882 – it is unclear if they visited New Orleans.³⁸ P.T. Barnum included Zulus in his circus’s “Among the Curiosities,” and the group toured the North and Western United States.³⁹ Other circuses soon featured Zulus as well. However, not all of the performers were ethnic Zulus: African Americans and even white performers in blackface filled in as Zulu warriors for some of the shows.⁴⁰

Zulus, both real and fake, became a staple of early twentieth century entertainment. World fairs regularly featured Zulu shows and displays of native villages in the early twentieth century, starting with Chicago’s World Columbian Exposition in 1893; the event featured a reenactment of a British defeat of the Zulus – with African Americans and native Zulus mixing as the latter.⁴¹ Historians Robert Trent Vinson and Robert Edgar argue that representations of Zulus in America from 1880 to 1945 followed and fed into white supremacist ideology that held up the white man as the “civilized” conqueror and the Zulu as the “uncivilized” savage, a stereotype applied to all Africans, and used to support Jim Crow. The Zulus on the stage performed as the backwards savage, putting on the afore-mentioned war dances, and “proving” their authenticity in the eyes of the audience – even when played by imitators – by displaying “fierceness.”⁴² This could be seen at the 1933 “Century of Progress Exposition” which featured ethnic Zulus as part of the “In Darkest Africa” portion; the producers used the Zulus and other Africans as juxtapositions to Western advancements.

Early performances

The New Orleans-based Zulu krewe’s early performances, while limited at first due to lack of funding, established the basic elements of their depiction, including characters and costumes. Although containing aspects that the all-white krewe of Rex – created in 1872 – had already popularized, including a king, scepter, and throne, the Zulus drew inspiration from elsewhere. The first staging mirrored the depictions of South African Zulus popular in vaudeville and other entertainment mediums, and met New Orleanians’ understandings and expectations of how a Zulu should act and dress. While the organization soon expanded their performance, adding more elaborate costumes, additional characters, and mock villages on floats, the original representation changed little over the next century. Hence, the initial parades deserve detailed attention and analysis.

In 1909, after the purported viewing of the vaudeville act, the Tramps dressed up and performed as Zulus for the first time. William King served as the Zulu’s first king; for his royal costume, he wore a lard can for a crown, a banana stalk as a scepter, and a burlap sack as cape.⁴³ Story and the other marchers all dressed in blackface as well. The organization’s performance slowly expanded. In 1915, the krewe paraded its first float. In 1916, the Zulu

³⁷Peacock, *The Great Farini*.

³⁸Vinson and Edgar, “Zulus Abroad.”

³⁹Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville*.

⁴⁰Vinson and Edgar, “Zulus Abroad.”

⁴¹Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*.

⁴²Vinson and Edgar, “Zulus Abroad.”

⁴³Sorrell, “Zulu Club Selects Trainer.”

Social Aid and Pleasure Club officially incorporated as a benevolent association with the following mission statement:

for social purposes, to establish between its members ties of friendship and sociability; to establish between them aid and esteem for the promotion of good fellowship and friendly intercourse between the members and their guests.⁴⁴

By the end of the decade, the krewe had established a mythology behind the king. Members of the organization told children that the parade's king lived in the legendary "Zululand" in Africa and sailed on his royal yacht for New Orleans starting the day after Christmas, arriving on the morning of Fat Tuesday on the New Basin Canal at Howard Avenue and South Rampart Street.⁴⁵ In the 1920s, the king wore a grass skirt; black tights with painted green and red streaks; a tin crown; a broomstick with a stuffed white rooster as a scepter; and black face with white around the eyes and mouth as well as green and red circles and lines. Later the king's crown switched to gold and he added a rabbit-skin vest (Figures 1–3).



Figure 1. King Zulu (unknown year). © State Library of Louisiana.

⁴⁴Geronimi, "Parade Zulu and Indian Carnival."

⁴⁵Ralph Matthews, "Welcome His Majesty," *Afro-American*, February 17, 1934.



Figure 2. Zulu king on float approximately 1930. WPA Collection, © State Library of Louisiana.



Figure 3. King Zulu debarks Mardi Gras Day from his boat. © State Library of Louisiana.

The early royal entourage also included his queen – a man dressed as a woman until the 1930s – the crown prince, and grand duke all dressed in purple and red scarves. Other main characters included the Witch Doctor and later the African Big Shot, added in the

1930s.⁴⁶ The *Times Picayune* described minstrels playing instruments and singing “plantation melodies,” noted as the king’s favorite music, to greet the monarch.⁴⁷ Brass bands led the king, 50 warriors in “full war point and carrying spears,” and followers down Rampart to Canal Street, and then down Carondelet Street.⁴⁸ Early on the parade featured only two floats: one for the king, which used as decorations the material from the royal yacht, and a second float that included a cook frying fish for the loyal subjects; later, other floats were added, furnished to have the appearance of what the Federal Writer Project’s *New Orleans City Guide* called a “home-town jungle” and inhabited by “jungle beasts” that distributed coconuts to spectators.⁴⁹ The parade ended with a masque ball at Tammany Hall.⁵⁰

Numerous scholars describe Zulu’s genesis and early performances as a parody or burlesque of Rex, the most famous Mardi Gras Krewe.⁵¹ They argue that the floats, royalty, ball, and other elements aped the white organization (Figure 4).

For example, Joseph Roach argued that Zulu used Mardi Gras not just to mock Rex but to also to “make fun of white folks and the stupidity of their jury-rigged construction of race.”⁵²

Yet, these interpretations overlook both the claims of members of Zulu themselves throughout the organization’s existence, and the historical context of the organization’s creation and early performances. It is true that the Zulu krewe contained elements found in white Mardi Gras krewes like the use of floats and a royalty with a ruling king. However, there were notable differences, and Zulu’s performance seemingly did not mock Rex or white stereotypes of African Americans, but rather created a performance based upon cultural constructions of the South African Zulu popular at the time of krewe’s origins in 1909. The Zulu warriors that marched in the organization’s parade dressed not only like vaudeville performers, but were also akin to the representations found in shows like P.T. Barnum’s “Great Ethnological Congress” and the World’s Fairs. These exhibitions claimed to feature authentic Zulus dressed in native garb, and thus offered a view of the South African Zulu to American audiences. Early twentieth century postcards contained pictures of Zulus. Advertisements for travel to South Africa featured pictures and drawings of Zulus as exotic attractions awaiting visitors.

The appearance of the Zulus of New Orleans matched these images of the South African Zulu propagated in the popular mediums, and their performance followed the script of other staging. In 1932, the krewe’s floats featured wild mountain goats, coconut trees, vineyards, and one float designed to honor “Chaka who rode in a chariot drawn by zebras.”⁵³ In 1938, the *Louisiana Weekly*, the city’s leading black newspaper, noted the parade was “revealing the symbolic mystery behind the tradition the famous club dedicated to those who would like to know the history of the club, which will also be of historical nature.” The “historical nature” the club demonstrated that year included floats themed “Nest of Reptiles” and “Jungle Madness,” all featuring “dusky subjects” who “demonstrate the advantage of strength and animal instinct.”⁵⁴

⁴⁶Berry, “Mardi Gras in New Orleans, USA.”

⁴⁷“Zulu King Comes Here For Carnival,” *Times-Picayune*, February 9, 1921.

⁴⁸“Everything Reported Ready for Regal Pageant,” *Times-Picayune*, February 2, 1921.

⁴⁹*New Orleans City Guide*, 182.

⁵⁰“Zulu King Comes Here For Carnival.”

⁵¹Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*; Kinser, *Carnival, American Style*; and Roach, *Cities of the Dead*.

⁵²Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 21.

⁵³“Guns Roar as Zulu King Comes Ashore,” *Louisiana Weekly*, February 13, 1932.

⁵⁴“John L. Metoyer, Pres. Of Zulus, Announces Mardi Gras Parade,” *Louisiana Weekly*, January 29, 1938.

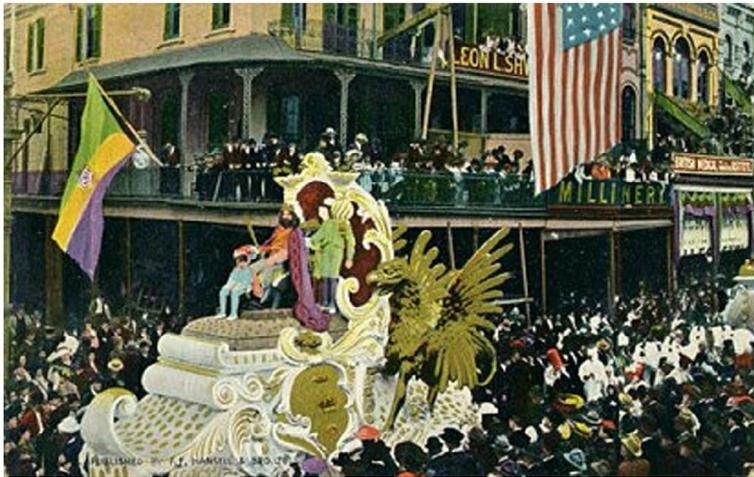


Figure 4. Krewe of Rex parading in 1904, public domain image.

The krewe's depiction also reflected city's limited tangible ties to South Africa. Many New Orleanians in the early twentieth century had little direct knowledge of South Africa, outside of those individuals involved in trading between New Orleans and ports in South Africa. One African American named J. Custis Horton wrote an editorial in the *Louisiana Weekly* in 1938 decrying the krewe's performance as "not allegoric or historic" and noted that the portrayal in no way matched the "thirty distinct races and tribes" he encountered throughout the continent. Their act, he opined "was so hopelessly inane that it would be declassé in the African jungles. It serves only to make the Negro appear grotesque and ridiculous."

Experiences in Africa remained limited to those like Horton that worked on trade ships. Steam freighters regularly sailed between the Port of New Orleans and Cape Town in the early twentieth century, especially during the Second Boer War (1899–1902).⁵⁵ During the conflict, the British military established their own port section in the city and sent tens of thousands of horses, mules, and other livestock to South Africa, as well as guns and additional supplies, at a cost of tens of millions of dollars. The British purchased the goods and animals in the US, as well as actively recruited for soldiers to fight in South Africa, and then shipped the cargo, along with white and black porters and muleteers from New Orleans to Cape Town.⁵⁶ The shipments attracted the attention of the Boer and Boer sympathizers, who made several attempts to blow up and sink the South-African bound ships, leading the British to send warships to escort the vessels from the Port of New Orleans in 1901.⁵⁷ After the war ended, Boer and British soldiers paraded in the US, arriving first in New Orleans, and then marching in Atlanta in 1905; the British contingent included ethnic Zulus who fought on their side.⁵⁸

⁵⁵"Foreign Trade Requirements: Containing Complete Information Concerning the Commercial Countries of the World" (New York: Lewes, Scribner & Company, 1903).

⁵⁶"New Orleans to Continue Port of Exit for South Africa," *New York Times*, July 16, 1902.

⁵⁷"Plot to Sink Vessel," *The Washington Post*, August 11, 1901.

⁵⁸Atkins Tommy, "Here With Boers," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 20, 1905. They also appeared as part of the "Boer War Exhibition" at the 1904 St. Louis World Fair. Sean O'Toole, "Story of South Africa's First Black Olympians Keeps Us Guessing," *Mail and Guardian*, July 7, 2016.

The shipping between New Orleans and Cape Town continued after the war ended; for example, a steamship company formed in 1904 with the express purpose of transporting Southern pine and livestock between the two cities.⁵⁹ In general, though, the exchange of commodities between the United States and South Africa declined after the latter imposed new tariffs in 1903.⁶⁰ Beyond trade, representatives from the Transvaal came to New Orleans in 1904 to study cotton growing with a plan to reproduce the American methods and utilize the Southern cotton seeds in Natal, South Africa.⁶¹

The tangible connections between New Orleans and South Africa, though, remained relatively minimal for most of the first half of the twentieth century. Throughout this time-period the Zulu krewe changed little as well. While expanding the number of floats and making more elaborate costumes and sets, the organization followed the script of the early performances. Perhaps this consistency was unsurprising in light of the fact that the other Mardi Gras krewes of the era, notably the prominent white-only Rex, altered insignificantly as part of their emphasis on tradition. Yet, if Zulu and other krewes experienced little change and the tangible links between New Orleans and South Africa stayed at a low level in the following decades, the world nevertheless shifted, resulting in amended outsider perceptions of Zulu and criticism that nearly brought down the club in the mid-century.

The following episodes detail the ways that the New Orleans krewe interacted with and was affected by connections to South Africa and Africa in general. Strengthening economic ties mixed with political relationships, cultural exchanges, an increasing sense of a Pan-African identity, and other links, shaping the organization's perception in the ensuing decades.

1941: Selassie

In 1941, Zulu themed their parade to commemorate the return of Emperor Haile Selassie to Ethiopia after six years in exile following the Italian invasion.⁶² For many, the Ethiopian defense became a source of a growing Pan African identity and pride, and Selassie served as a heroic symbol of resistance to European colonialism and fascism. Thousands of African Americans donated money and medical supplies to support Ethiopia, and many sought to volunteer in the defense of the country, which the federal government prohibited.⁶³ In 1937, the *Louisiana Weekly* reported on the radiogram that King Zulu sent annually during his voyage from Africa to New Orleans for Carnival. The yacht that year was named "Selassie" and the newspaper noted that King Zulu, "who led the battalion of death during the recent Italo-Ethiopian War," told his followers "that he is merely taking time out to see the Carnival spirit here ... The war, he says, is far from being over and he must hurry back to keep the morale of his fighters ace high." Additionally, he promised to distribute to parade-goers "war relics" he had captured from the Italians.⁶⁴

The radiogram in 1937 and parade in 1941 revealed a growing connection to Africa (but not South Africa) for some African Americans – New Orleans was one of a number

⁵⁹"Steamship Line Projected," *Wall Street Journal*, January 22, 1904.

⁶⁰Campbell, "The Americanization of South Africa."

⁶¹"Studying Cotton Growing," *The New York Times*, January 16, 1904.

⁶²"Zulu Parade at Mardi Gras to Return King," *The Ogden Standard-Examiner*, February 13, 1941.

⁶³Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia*, 37–48.

⁶⁴"Zulu King Forgets War for Mardi Gras," *Louisiana Weekly*, January 30, 1937.

of cities that held large rallies in support of Ethiopia's struggle against Italy in 1935, many organized by the Communist Party –⁶⁵ as well as foreshadowing the dedication of future Zulu parades to celebrate either particular African ethnic groups or notable individuals. A beloved figure amongst working class African Americans in New Orleans, the decision to narrate King Zulu's fictional participation in the defense of Ethiopia further demonstrated their support for Ethiopia, and an interest in African affairs. Ultimately, this did not change the organization's performance of Zulu. The krewe did not significantly alter their usual staging in 1941, using the standard costumes and floats. Thus, for the members, their celebration of Selassie, seen as a hero to many African Americans, did not seemingly contradict or clash with their performance of Zulu. However, in the 1960s some African Americans expressed condemnation of the krewe's depiction of Africans, part of a larger critique of the organization that nearly led to its demise.

1960s: "blackout"

Zulu's popularity expanded in the 1940s and 1950s. Black New Orleanians, especially members of the working class, largely embraced the organization – Louis Armstrong repeatedly told reporters that serving as King Zulu was the dream of young African Americans growing up in the Crescent City.⁶⁶ White New Orleanians also increasingly attended the Zulu parades. Even at the height of segregation, tens of thousands of white spectators watched King Zulu disembark on Rampart Street or parade on black-occupied streets.

For many in the city, the performance of Zulu probably matched their own imagining of the South African Zulu as well in the first half of the twentieth century. Both black and white newspapers celebrated the krewe and endorsed the performance as "traditional" and reflective of South Africa Zulus. For example, the prominent African American newspaper *Pittsburgh Courier* described the parade's floats in 1937, seemingly without being tongue in cheek, as "characteristically African."⁶⁷

However, this era also witnessed a growing criticism of the organization starting in the early 1940s, first from African Americans outside of the city, and then from Civil Rights and civic leaders in New Orleans. Opponents argued that Zulu's performance fed into negative white stereotypes of African Americans, with few noting their actual designed purpose to depict South African Zulus, not black Americans. Crescent City African American leaders lambasted the afore-mentioned 1941 Zulu parade, writing editorials in the *Louisiana Weekly* positing that "no self-respecting person can point to one constructive contribution of the late Zulu burlesque."⁶⁸ Many outsiders viewed Zulu as a minstrel-like performance designed to appease whites, especially after the organization marched for the first time in 1946 on St. Charles Avenue in a predominantly white neighborhood – although they still remained banned from the French Quarter. NAACP Field Secretary Clarence Laws called for banning the parade in 1956 "unless they exhibit more order and dignity." Laws argued the group "ridicules the entire Negro race."⁶⁹ The *Chicago Defender* went even further and held up the organization's negative behavior as a means through whites justified white supremacy,

⁶⁵Munro, "Ethiopia Stretches Forth Across the Atlantic."

⁶⁶Stein, *Music Is My Life*.

⁶⁷"New Orleans' Basin Street Canal Is Closed By Commission Council," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 10, 1937.

⁶⁸"Mardi Grad Actions Rapped by Paper," *Afro American*, April 5, 1941.

⁶⁹Paul Burton, "Mardi Gras Zulus To Defy NAACP Plea For Dignity," *Chicago Defender*, February 13, 1956.

noting that King Zulu “has been depicted as a drunk, undisciplined, but lovable, boor – just the image of Negroes wanted by New Orleans racists to keep Negroes in their place.”⁷⁰ Some accused white merchants of financing the Zulu performances, which became increasingly true as African Americans stopped supporting the club.⁷¹

The attacks on the Mardi Gras krewe were part of a larger criticism of the performance of Zulu by African American groups that emerged in the 1940s. For example, detractors argued the Jax Zulu Hippopotamus Clowns, a New Orleans Negro League baseball team started in the early 40s, “helps our reputation as a race of clowns,” through their wearing of grass skirts, wigs, and all black uniforms.⁷² In an even more direct parallel and emulation, A.S. May of Mobile Alabama formed the Knights of May Zulu in 1938 for that city’s Mardi Gras celebrations after viewing the New Orleans organization’s parade, joining other Zulu Mardi Gras krewes in Houston and Baton Rouge. Members of the Mobile Colored Carnival Association assailed the group in 1947 as “shameful,” particularly their use of blackface, leading to a major rift within the community and the club’s eventual demise in 1952.⁷³

The critique of the Zulu Mardi Gras krewe reached a crescendo in the 1960s. In 1961, leading African American Civil Rights leaders and social clubs called for a “blackout” of all of Mardi Gras as a protest against segregation, in wake of the New Orleans school system’s fight against integration.⁷⁴ The move also followed boycotts of white businesses on Dryades and Canal streets that refused to hire black workers. African American social organizations rather than holding Mardi Gras balls in 1961 donated the money allocated, over \$100,000 dollars, to the NAACP and the Urban League.⁷⁵ Zulu, though, held its annual parade, in defiance of the boycott. The original king and queen were forced to resign when critics threatened to boycott their businesses. Significantly fewer African Americans came that year to witness King Zulu’s disembarking from the royal yacht, and the city provided police protection against feared African American retaliation; additionally, some alleged that the mayor prevailed upon Zulu to march after an initial decision to participate in the “blackout.”⁷⁶

However, many of the working class black residents supported the krewe and viewed their performance with pride. For them, Zulu served as one way they could actually enjoy Mardi Gras despite the segregation of Carnival and city life in general. Others supported the krewe by claiming that the parade subversively mocked white krewes like Rex and stereotypes of African Americans propagated by whites. Members of Zulu supported the first assertion, but openly rejected the latter. Speaking with reporter Calvin Trillin in 1964, parade chairman Alex Raphael, Jr. stated Zulu “had something original ... There’s no making fun in it.” Zulu, he argued, was not based at all on Rex and did not parody the older krewe. Their purpose, instead, was twofold: first, to serve as a “comical parade”; and second, Raphael professed that he and other members felt that they had a “civic duty to march.”⁷⁷ In their view, they

⁷⁰“King Zulu’s Parade Draws Protests,” *Chicago Defender*, February 23, 1966.

⁷¹*Cleveland Call and Post*, March 9, 1957.

⁷²“What’s Wrong with Negro Baseball,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, November 20, 1943. The Zulu Cannibal Giants, founded in 1934 and based out of Louisville may have served as the inspiration; they wore similar outfits and received similar criticism from black civic leaders.

⁷³Downtown Historical, “First Mardi Gras in America,” <http://downtownmobilehistorical.blogspot.com/2010/02/first-mardi-gras-in-america-mobile.html>.

⁷⁴Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 175.

⁷⁵“Select King Of Zulus,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, February 04, 1961.

⁷⁶“Negroes Nix New Orleans Mardi Gras with Boycott,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 25, 1961.

⁷⁷Trillin, *Jackson*, 1964, 46.

had a responsibility to black New Orleanians to participate in Carnival as the only African Americans sanctioned to partake in official activities. Members also felt satisfaction in providing entertainment and levity, if only for a brief moment during the Carnival season, particularly needed during the height of the discrimination and oppression of Jim Crow.

Additionally, some working class African Americans perceived black civic leaders' condemnation of Zulu to be an attempt to force their own middle class values upon the krewe and its supporters.⁷⁸ This battle over "respectability" as embodied in the conflict over Zulu, divided the black community in New Orleans along class lines during the Civil Rights struggle.⁷⁹ It also briefly split the krewe, and nearly led to its demise.

The attempts at a united black boycott continued throughout the decade, as did Zulu's participation – and condemnation from most black leaders and social organizations – in Mardi Gras. In 1964, Dr. Leonard Burns, spokesperson for the "blackout," proposed infiltrating supporters into Zulu in order to change the organization from within.⁸⁰ By the following year, this method achieved success. The new members, who seized leadership, promised that year to abandon their use of blackface and "African" garb, and hold a more "dignified" parade that would reflect racial "pride."⁸¹ That year King Zulu wore an outfit of all white satin and a gold crown, "much to the dismay of spectators," noted the *Chicago Tribune*. Some African Americans ironically attacked the 1965 changes – the dropping of the customary blackface and Zulu costume – as a sign that the organization had become "white" and abandoned their tradition of ridiculing white stereotypes.⁸²

In response to the "blackout" and changed costumes by Zulu, white proponents of the krewe and their traditional performance in blackface and grass skirts adopted the idea that Zulu was a light-hearted "burlesque of Rex," and therefore did not ridicule African Americans.⁸³ It is probable that this claim reflected white business leaders' desire to keep the krewe, popular with white crowds and a bid draw for tourists, marching. It perhaps may have also reflected white beliefs that African Americans had to be copying white organizations as they could not have come up with the idea on their own.

By 1967, Zulu resumed their traditional performance, putting on, in the words of that year's King Zulu Milton Bienamee, a "real African parade," with the theme "inspired by life in the African jungle."⁸⁴ The *Times Picayune* noted that in addition to the old costumes and floats, the parade included the customary coconuts, that year carved to look like monkey faces or "African heads," as well as replica "cannibal heads," all imported from South Africa, which gave the items "the stamp of authenticity to locale."⁸⁵ Furthering this attempt to establish a tie to Africa, the krewe also tossed out doubloons with the Zulu King on one side and the Hausa – a large West African ethnic group – on the other. Each year the organization featured a different animal or ethnic group from Africa; for example, 1965 had the Watusi group; 1966, the Ethiop group; 1968, the African Lion; 1969, the African Elephant; and 1970, the Bantu group.

⁷⁸Reid, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 182.

⁷⁹Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 49.

⁸⁰Reid, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 188.

⁸¹"Vow Famous Zulu Parade To Be Boiled Down To Decency," *Chicago Defender*, February 27, 1965.

⁸²Alfred Barcover, "Climax to Carnival Season," *Chicago Tribune*, January 30, 1966.

⁸³Barcover, "Climax to Carnival Season."

⁸⁴"King Zulu Returning to Tradition," *The Advocate*, February 5, 1967.

⁸⁵"Zulu Parade to Offer Real African Flavor," *Times Picayune*, February 4, 1967.

In 1968, Zulu split into two groups, one favoring the older costumes and the Leonard Burns insurgent faction favoring more “dignified” attire. The former held their parades in 1968 – with the theme “Ethiopia stretches forth her hand in friendship” – and 1969, although membership dropped to dangerously low numbers in light of continued protests of Zulu.⁸⁶

While many African Americans criticized Zulu for their parade, few assailed the group for their stereotypical or unrepresentative portrayal of Africans. Instead, derision centered on the krewe playing into white stereotypes of African Americans. In fact, even at the height of the Civil Rights protest and backlash, newspapers continued to describe Zulu as wearing “African native costumes.”⁸⁷ Martin Bienamee told the *Times Picayune* that “there’s nothing wrong with the tradition of the African image, as portrayed by the Zulu organization.”⁸⁸

However, several groups did see something wrong. In 1961 the All African Student Union of the America presented a petition to Mayor Chep Morrison which protested the “misrepresentation” of “African culture and personality” noting the “Zulu farce” threatened the “good and friendly relations of the African and American peoples, which we are building.”⁸⁹ That same year an editorial in the *Louisiana Weekly* argued that the krewe’s continuing performance as “Africans” was motivated solely by desire for financial support and ignored how the act insulted Africans:

The fact that twenty-six nations have gained freedom in the past few years and hold seats in the U.N. with respect and honor and would not look kindly on us...making mockery of a proud and honorable African tribe did not reach the Zulus. All they could see was white face and green money.⁹⁰

Two points should be highlighted. First, in the editorialist’s perspective, the krewe’s performance was not playing to stereotypes of African Americans, but rather mocking ethnic Zulus in Africa. Second, the krewe’s act was particularly egregious in light of the recent independence of African states, further demonstrating the connection the author drew to Africa.

In 1969, the African American Cultural Foundation, Inc., the Black Educational and Cultural Society, and the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, among several organizations, released a signed statement assailing the misrepresentation:

The Zulu Club members evidently have not done any historical research into their African heritage, they fell victims to those racists who found it to their delight to finance and encourage our people to induce them to the act of self debasement, in their Carnival festival which affects not only the Zulu organization, but all Black people in New Orleans, throughout the United States of America, and the World.⁹¹

That year, a truck carrying protestors distributing anti-Zulu flyers, and a car carrying the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women’s president Queen Mother Moore, followed the official Zulu floats in their parade.⁹² Yet, few others seemed concerned about this “misrepresentation” of Africans, and instead worried about the damage to African Americans and their struggle for Civil Rights in the US.

⁸⁶Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 189.

⁸⁷“Armstrong Named King of the Zulus,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 18, 1949.

⁸⁸“Big Shot of Africa Role is Awarded by Bienamee,” *Times-Picayune*, February 12, 1968.

⁸⁹“African Students Protest,” *The Crisis* 68, no. 4 (April 1961).

⁹⁰Trillin, *Jackson*, 1964, 40.

⁹¹Geronimi, “Parade Zulu and Indian Carnival.”

⁹²Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 189.

It is difficult to gauge New Orleans interest in or knowledge of South Africa at the time-period. Local papers like the *Times Picayune* did carry stories about South African politics, the Zulu ethnic group, and resistance against apartheid, implemented as South African government policy in 1948. After the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the United Nations and the international community increasingly criticized the apartheid state. Although the United States ended arms dealing with South Africa in 1964, American representatives vetoed an international ban of South African products and economic trading continued, including from the port of New Orleans which shipped cars and other commodities to South Africa. South Africa even had a trade consulate in New Orleans.⁹³ Ships also brought travelers between the two locations.⁹⁴ Seemingly, though, outside of the few New Orleanians that traveled to South Africa for vacation or as crew of a transport ship, residents' knowledge of South Africa continued to be largely shaped by similar entertainment mediums as in an earlier decades. For example, the 1964 hit film *Zulu*, which focused on one of the battles in the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War, contained the same stereotypes of Zulu warriors as the newspaper coverage and Zulu shows of the past, displaying the Zulus as fierce and bloodthirsty, but low-intelligence warriors. The *New York Times* review described the film as "all too true," the British soldiers as "beautifully courageous" and the Zulus as "wild, audacious and remarkably easy to kill"; the reviewer did question whether the film might not have been "desirable" with its screenings coming at a time with "tensions and discords so prevalent ... Is it a contribution to the cause of harmony to show so much vicious acrimony between black men and white?"⁹⁵ Despite these concerns, the film was a box office smash and received near universal praise. Few if any critics or audience members assailed the portrayal of the Zulu.⁹⁶ This image of the Zulu, seen on the big screen and on the Mardi Gras float, remained an acceptable representation of the South African ethnic group during the era. In 1986, though, the krewe found itself involved in another controversy, one shaped by the changing ties to and attitudes toward the South African state.

1986: an aborted visit

Despite the critiques and boycotts of the 1960s, Zulu survived and in some ways became seen as part of the Civil Rights victories of the era. In 1969, municipal leaders allowed the krewe to parade on Canal Street. This marked the first time that city politicians allowed a black organization to partake in the official Mardi Gras parade routes. Krewe leaders held this achievement up as a victory for black rights in the city and placed the clubs in the ranks of other Civil Rights organizations. "Our members," proclaimed Zulu historian John Rousseau, "support all organizations fighting for the rights of blacks, the oppressed and all men."⁹⁷

Zulu's membership slowly grew again in the 1970s and by the 1980s it had the largest membership for any African American krewe, with many former opponents joining the organization. Zulu maintained its customary staging in spite of increased knowledge about Africa and growing interest in Africa culture amongst the African American community

⁹³Campbell, "The Americanization of South Africa," 27; and "Gulf Port Scores Railroads in East," *New York Times*, January 24, 1936.

⁹⁴"Shipping News and Notes," *New York Times*, January 6, 1951.

⁹⁵Bosley Crowther, "It's British vs. Natives in Action-Filled 'Zulu,'" *New York Times*, July 8, 1964.

⁹⁶Hall, *Zulu*.

⁹⁷Chamberlain, "From Tramps to Kings."

with the rise of Black Nationalism. In 1970, for example, the Jazz and Heritage Festival began. Black leaders criticized the event for its failure to include African Americans as producers. Members of the Afrikan American Jazz Festival Coalition (also known as Koindu) demanded inclusion of black board members and threatened to disrupt the 1978 event if their demands were not met; the board complied. The new African American leadership made several notable changes reflecting an interest in Africa. The board members advocated using African art in the festival's decorations and in the gate to the festival's entrance at Congo Square. They also included African-inspired visual art, artists, and vendors in a new festival space known as Koindu – later changed to Congo Square.⁹⁸ For many African Americans, Congo Square itself represented a strong connection to Africa. The space was the site of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gatherings of enslaved Africans, and considered the birthplace of African American music. Closed to African Americans in 1817, white leaders renamed the space Beuregard Square in 1893 (after a New Orleans born Confederate general). However, in 1970 city officials changed the name to Louis Armstrong Park.⁹⁹

Despite increased knowledge of Africa and the spreading of a Pan African identity, Zulu did not alter its performance. As the krewe became accepted by and populated with the “respectable” middle and upper class members that once condemned the organization as an “embarrassment,” one significant thing did change. Starting in the 1970s, the organization no longer asserted that they performed as “Africans.” This occurred as the krewe expanded its function as a benevolent society, engaging in community service activities, forging partnerships with local non-profits and schools, carrying out fundraisers for charitable causes, and even forming the Zulu Federal Credit Union.¹⁰⁰ Zulu's increased presence in the community fostered a growing embrace of the club as a New Orleans tradition and institution, with support cutting across racial and class lines.

Despite this popularity, controversy did erupt in 1986, and the strengthened ties to Africa played a significant role. That year, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club president Roy E. Glapion and the organization's float designer Blaine Kern planned a trip to South Africa to meet with Zululand's prime minister Mangosuthu Buthelezi and invite back 50 South African Zulus to march in that year's Mardi Gras. As part of the trip, Kern also planned to include Edwin Lombard, the clerk of the Orleans Parish Criminal District Court, and bring a float and integrated jazz band to march in a celebration of Johannesburg's centennial that August. Criticism, though quickly derailed the visit. Anti-apartheid and Civil Rights leaders in the city decried the trip as a tacit endorsement of apartheid, particularly as the government of Johannesburg had invited Kern and planned to underwrite the costs of the trip; they told Kern, who was white, that the apartheid rules restricting black movement would not apply to Glapion and Lombard, both African American.¹⁰¹ Although Kern, Glapion, and Lombard all issued statements that they were against apartheid, and Kern argued the trip had “nothing to do with politics, it's strictly people to people,” the New Orleans musician's union and all 23 members of Zulu's board members voted against permitting the trip, and threatened to dismiss anyone who participated.¹⁰² At a news conference, Glapion supported

⁹⁸Regis, “Producing Africa at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.”

⁹⁹Evans, *Congo Square*.

¹⁰⁰Chamberlain, “From Tramps to Kings.”

¹⁰¹Buthelezi too was a controversial figure, heavily criticized by the African National Congress, particularly for his opposition to international anti-apartheid sanctions. Temkin, *Buthelezi*, 257.

¹⁰²“Float Maker's Trip to S. Africa Opposed,” *Times Picayune*, July 16, 1986.

the board's ruling, placing the trip into the larger political climate of the period: "The very essence of leaders across this nation in calling for economic and political the South African government would be negated if I were to embark upon such an unthinkable venture."¹⁰³ Kern bowed to pressure and canceled the trip.

The incident reflected both the internal situation in South Africa, and a rapidly changing relationship between the United States and South Africa, particularly in trade, and one that played out at the local level in New Orleans. New Orleans served as the major port for the importation of goods from South Africa. For example, from January to August 1984, 69% of the tonnage of imported goods from South Africa came through the port of New Orleans.¹⁰⁴ These goods included precious metals and radioactive material.

Criticism of the apartheid government in New Orleans and elsewhere increased in reaction to state-sponsored violence in South Africa. In 1983, the United Democratic Front initiated a boycott against South Africa's parliamentary elections in response to their exclusion of Africans from the tri-cameral legislature. Anti-apartheid efforts, including strikes and burning of government buildings increased. In retaliation, the government closed down hundreds of schools, sent in troops to the townships, and detained thousands.¹⁰⁵ The repressive actions of the South African government brought international condemnation, including protest in New Orleans. In 1983, South African refugee and activist Selby Semela initiated the formation of the New Orleans Committee Against Apartheid.¹⁰⁶ The group carried out protests against New Orleans's trade with South Africa; formed an alliance with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to block shipments of South African uranium to the Port of New Orleans; forced the closing of the South African apartheid government's New Orleans consulate after months of protests in 1985; successfully pressured the New Orleans City Council to pass a resolution in 1985 to end ties with banks and firms that conducted business with the South African government; carried out a 1985–1986 boycott of Winn Dixie for its attempt to relabel goods imported from South Africa in a plan to disguise their country of origin; and picketed the Shell Oil service stations for the company's sending of fuel to South African Security Forces.¹⁰⁷ Other organizations and individuals pressed the issue as well. Students and other activists forced Dillard University to divest of stocks with ties to South Africa in April 1985.¹⁰⁸ That June New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial, head of the US conference of mayors, speaking at the eight annual meeting of TransAfrica – an organization leading the protests at the South African embassy in DC – urged advocates to lobby city governments to divest themselves of ties to banks and business with ties to South Africa.¹⁰⁹ Jesse Jackson convinced Teamsters to refuse to unload cargo from South Africa at the Port of New Orleans that August.¹¹⁰ Other cities and state governments followed the actions of New Orleans; by 1990, 89 other cities and 27 state governments had enacted embargoes or divested financial holdings with South Africa prohibiting future investments, bank loans, and some forms of trade with South Africa.¹¹¹

¹⁰³John Pope, "African Trip Vetoed by Zulus," *Times-Picayune*, July 22, 1986.

¹⁰⁴"South African Trade Heavy in N.O. Port," *Louisiana Weekly*, January 19, 1985.

¹⁰⁵Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*.

¹⁰⁶Adelaide Steedley, "Stepping into History, Part Two: An Activist for Divestiture," *Flow Magazine*, May 3, 2016.

¹⁰⁷Eric Mann, "History Can Guide Us: Toward a Third Reconstruction," *Monthly Review Magazine*, October 6, 2005.

¹⁰⁸"Black College Is Pressed To Take a Costly Step," *New York Times*, April 25, 1986.

¹⁰⁹Jacqueline Trescott, "Mayors Chief Urges Protests Of Apartheid," *Washington Post*, June 2, 1985.

¹¹⁰"New Orleans Teamsters Agree Not to Unload Pretoria Cargo," *Washington Post*, August 26, 1985.

¹¹¹See Edgar, *Sanctioning Apartheid*.

The widespread boycotts and protests against South Africa directly affected the Zulu krewe. Glapion and Kern hoped to make the organization's parade in 1987 the most memorable to date with the inclusion of the 50 Zulus from South Africa. Their plan to include the South African group represented an attempt to create their most significant and tangible tie to their namesake. Yet, the events in South Africa and in New Orleans prevented their vision.

1994–2014: growing connection

The New Orleans-South African connection expanded significantly in the two decades after Zulu voted to cancel Kern's 1986 plan, seen most visibly in social and cultural exchanges, especially with South African musicians performing in New Orleans. In 1994, de jure apartheid finally ended in South Africa with the release of Nelson Mandela and his election to the presidency in the first democratic elections in 1994. From 1994 onward, South African musicians had a significant presence in New Orleans.

The music ties between the city and South Africa went back to the early twentieth century. American sea merchants first introduced jazz to South Africa in 1918 with the first recorded Jazz album (1917) by the New Orleans group "The Original New Orleans Dixieland Band." New Orleans style jazz proliferated after World War I in Cape Town, played by both local groups and touring American bands, and made popular through the radio. Black South Africans in particular embraced the music style, and synthesized jazz into their own township music that grew increasingly popular through the 1950s. This in turn inspired another generation of South African musicians, many of whom, like Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, came to the United States and played in New Orleans.¹¹² Organizers invited both Makeba and Masekela to play Jazzfest's 25th Anniversary in 1994.¹¹³ That fall New Orleans hosted the African Heritage Festival, which featured South African musicians and performances of Zulu warrior dances by the Soweto Street Beat Dance Company.¹¹⁴

That same year the two locations established a growing business and trade connection, and Zulu play an interesting role. In 1994 Mayor Marc Morial signed a trade agreement with the country. In 1996 South African ambassador Franklin Sonn came to the Crescent City and rode on one of Zulu's Mardi Gras floats as part of his official visit to discuss trade opportunities for New Orleans businesses in his country.¹¹⁵ In this case, Mayor Morial – the son of Dutch Morial, one of the leaders of the 1960s protests against Zulu and later an honorary member when he became the first African American mayor of the city – and other city leaders utilized the parade as a means to show cultural connections between the places in hopes of strengthening financial ties. This was not the only time Zulu was used in such a manner.

Other links followed the business relationships. In 1998 Damon Batiste founded the New Orleans South African Connection, Inc., a non-profit designed to foster business, civic, and entertainment connections and exchanges between the two locations.¹¹⁶ In 2003 Mayor Ray Nagin signed a trade and cultural partnership with the mayor of Durban, South Africa (which includes Zululand). Additionally, in 2004 the South African embassy designated the

¹¹²Schadeberg, *Jazz Blues and Swing*. See also Coplan, *In Township Tonight*.

¹¹³Jacobsen, *The New Orleans Jazz Scene*.

¹¹⁴"Fest Brings World to N.O.," *Times-Picayune*, September 2, 1994.

¹¹⁵"The View from Africa," *Times-Picayune*, February 20, 1996.

¹¹⁶"About NOSACONN," 2013, http://www.nosaconn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48&Itemid=54.

2004 New Orleans Jazzfest as an official international event to mark the 10-year anniversary of post-apartheid democracy; the ensuing event featured over one hundred South African musicians and crafts people, including ethnic Zulus.¹¹⁷

The connections between New Orleans and South Africa symbolically culminated with the Zulu parade during the 2006 Carnival. Like the inclusion of the South African ambassador in 1996, organizers saw no problem with their performance of Zulu. To the contrary, again New Orleanians held up the krewe as a cultural connection to South Africa, which only grew in the years after. In particular, 2014 stood out as an exceptionally busy year. That year New Orleans and Durban officially became sister cities; Essence Music Festival, which began in New Orleans in 1994, expanded to Durban; and Zulu's Mardi Gras parade again included representatives from South Africa, this time business leaders looking to build relationships with the city, and the krewe's official theme for the parade honored the death of Nelson Mandela.¹¹⁸

Finally, in 2014 business leaders from New Orleans led by Ernest D. Kelly, the president of the New Orleans International Arts Foundation, visited South Africa. As part of their trip, Kelly met with Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu, the King of the South African Zulu nation. During the meeting, Kelly told the ruler of the New Orleans Mardi Gras krewe: "I explained to kaBhekuzulu that we have a different kind of Zulu King in New Orleans. He was not aware of it." Kelly also suggested to the king that the Zulu of South Africa sell their colorful beaded jewelry, for which they were known, to members of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, to establish a partnership. Kelly noted that the king approved but told a reporter that the New Orleans organization may not agree, as the "club isn't that educated in the [ethnic Zulu] culture."¹¹⁹

Conclusion

Viewers of the krewe of Zulu's parade today can witness a performance that has changed little since 1909. Costumes and floats have become more elaborate and membership has increased significantly, but the same basic elements populate each parade: the throwing of coconuts, the wearing of grass skirts, the staging of supposed jungle villages, warriors with spears, and blackface. For outsiders, these elements, especially the use of blackface, can be shocking and regularly invoke outrage. Amidst criticism from spectators in 2017, one Chicago resident wrote:

I have a problem with the blackface entirely. As do most people outside of the New Orleans tradition. Just as those who live outside of Cleveland think the Indians logo is racist and the term 'Redskins' is racist.¹²⁰

Defenders of the organization point to purported purpose of subversive parody as justification for the continued use of blackface. As one local wrote in *The Lens*: "In the best traditions of carnivalesque practice, Zulu has expropriated racist representations and inverted them as a form of anti-racist resistance."¹²¹ As addressed earlier in this article, many scholars support this claim as well. Yet, this largely ignores what members of the

¹¹⁷"South Africa Comes to Jazzfest," *Times-Picayune*, April 23, 2004.

¹¹⁸"Zulu Pays Tribute to Mandela," *Uptown Messenger*, March 4, 2014.

¹¹⁹Jed Lapinski, "South African Delegation Finds Connections Between Durban and New Orleans," *Times-Picayune*, July 3, 2014.

¹²⁰Todd Price, "Zulu Ride Leads to Apology and a Resignation at Tales of the Cocktail," *The Times Picayune*, March 4, 2017.

¹²¹C.W. Cannon, "Behind the Zulu Blackface Flap: Liberal Guilt, Clueless Outsiders," *The Lens*, March 10, 2017.

krewe have repeatedly stated, that the performance has never been intended to mock Rex or white stereotypes of African Americans.

Members do acknowledge a vaudeville performance in 1909 as the organization's original inspiration for their performance. Yet, when writers Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen interviewed the krewe's historians in 2009 about the use of blackface, the latter were not aware of blackface's historical ties with minstrelsy.¹²² Although both minstrelsy and Zulu aimed to make the audience laugh and feel entertained, krewe leaders ultimately saw their performance as disconnected from minstrelsy.

Scholars and critics rightfully bring up blackface's problematic past. The use of blackface in mainstream entertainment ended with the effort led by the NAACP to remove *Amos & Andy* from TV syndication in 1966.¹²³ Zulu, however, continues to employ the practice and finds many defenders in the New Orleans white and black community. The emphasis on tradition and anti-racist subversion have largely shielded the krewe's performance in recent decades.

This has not always been the case. As detailed earlier, for several decades in the mid-twentieth century, black civic leaders attacked the organization for its negative portrayal of African Americans. Additionally, others have periodically lambasted the depiction of Africans found in the krewe's parades. This critique too, has largely died out.

In the wake of condemnation, Zulu is now held up as a cultural institution in New Orleans and used as ambassadors to entertain foreign business representatives. Most strikingly, city leaders have helped forge a connection to South Africa through the krewe. Presented as New Orleans's "own Zulu" to Zululand's King kaBhekuzulu, the krewe has become disconnected not only from its previous denunciations, but also from its original claims to portray Africans. Leaders no longer defend the staging as a "real African parade," as King Zulu Milton Bienamee told reporters in 1967, and parade-goers too no longer described the costumes, floats, and coconuts as "characteristically African," as detailed by the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1937.

Although the costumes were originally based on a vaudeville performance, the krewe's links, both real and imaginary, to ethnic Zulus and South Africa should not be forgotten. These ties have both shaped the krewe's performance and spectators' reactions. At a time when New Orleans seemingly has its strongest connection with South Africa, this past should not be ignored.

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¹²²Taylor and Austen, *Darkest America*, 105.

¹²³Thelwell, "Nothing Now Goes Down But Burnt Cork," 357.

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