

The Mardi Gras Culture

The Mardi Gras culture is one culture that has been in existence for the longest time among the different cultures in the universe. It is a Christian carnival that has been held from thousands of years back and is celebrated in a lot of countries around the globe especially countries with large Roman Catholic following (Gotham, 2005). This festival takes place just a day before the start of Lent. This cultural event is mostly popular in Brazil, New Orleans and Venice where most public events are held with and attracts a large number of tourists.

According to the history books, this event started thousands of years ago in Rome at the time Christianity showed up in Rome. The religious leaders decided to include the cultural practices of the faith, and that is what gave birth to the Mardi Gras culture. This resulted in the culture being a prolog of Lent. Lent is the forty days that are between the Ash Wednesday and the Easter Monday (Gotham, 2005). With Christianity, this culture spread across Europe with Germany, Spain, England and France adopting this culture.

The days before Lent would see faithful go feasting on milk, meat, eggs and cheese left in their homes as they prepared for forty days of just eating fish. In a country like France, this culture came to be known as "Fat Tuesday" or "Carnival" which has become more popular than its original name, Mardi Gras.

In the United States, the culture is believed to have begun in 1699 when explorers from France set foot in Louisiana south of New Orleans which is now very famous for this cultural event. It is these French explorers that began the celebrations, and with time, it became street parties that were brilliant with marked balls and luxurious dinners. But when the Spaniards came and took control of New Orleans,

they banned these street parties which they termed rowdy until around 1812 when Louisiana became a state in the United States (Shrum & Kilburn, 1996).

Around 1827, during the Mardi Gras day, a crowd of students gathered and wore colorful attires as they danced across the streets in the New Orleans. This was as a result of what they had seen on a visit to Paris, a city in France. About ten years later, the first recorded Mardi Gras festival took place in New Orleans, and this has continued to date. Around 1857, people in business in New Orleans organized a torch-lit event which included bands that set the stage for the public celebrations we see today (Shrum & Kilburn, 1996).

Across the world, the pre-lent celebrations continued to happen in a lot of countries having a significant number of Roman Catholic followers. Most notable is Brazil which has the most elaborate celebrations which have amalgamated cultures from both Europe and Africa. In Canada, they host the “Quebec Winter Carnival” in the Quebec City while tourists flock to Italy's city of Venice which has held these celebrations since they began there. In Germany, the festival is known as "Fastnacht" or "Fasching" and is composed of parades, costumes, and women empowering tradition that encourages the women to cut men's ties off. In Denmark, the celebrations are known as "Fastevlan" where children are dressed up in costumes that resemble those used during the Halloween and ends where they are allowed to whip their parents on the morning of Easter Sunday.

Today, the Mardi Gras culture is characterized by a two-month celebration which ends in a huge parade of the "Krewes" an organization that designs the event and is a non-profit group. The festival has gone through a lot of changes and is no longer the Christian event it was initially. It has seen the development of intense

sexual activities and has become more compliant with today's cultural norms. It had become an event attended by a class of people as opposed to when it began. The upper class has made it a little difficult for the poor to participate due to the fantastic display that has characterized the events and material processions have been used as tools of negotiating choices at the event.

The Carnival in Brazil is a cultural event with both similarities and differences with the Mardi Gras culture. The Carnival could be said is a bigger version of the Mardi Gras. It is held forty-seven days before the Easter celebrations just like the Mardi Gras with the celebrations taking place everywhere in Brazil (Turner, 1983). The people of Brazil are just as warm as the people of New Orleans during the celebrations. It creates a feeling of unity among the people in both the Carnival and the Mardi Gras. In both ceremonies, the participants wear unique costumes and hold celebration parades across the streets of the major cities, New Orleans for the Mardi Gras and Rio de Janeiro for the Carnival.

However, there are differences between the Mardi Gras and the Carnival as well as other similar cultures. While Mardi Gras has a definite end, the Brazilian Carnival is uncontrollable and usually ends when the people are too tired to celebrate anymore. In Brazil, the Carnival not just anyone can join the celebrations as they belong to just two groups known as Favela which is the poorest of communities in Brazil. On the other hand, Mardi Gras is open to all and sundry provided they can be able to attend. The Brazilian Carnival is paid for in order to see the costumes in person while at the Mardi Gras, one can see the participants without making any payments.

In New Orleans, the celebrations are characterized by the participants donning outlandish and extravagant costumes with plentiful food available. The streets are often crowded, and people engage in binge drinking which goes on for days (Turner, 1983). In the Carnival, however, there are events of school going children fighting it out on the streets for the best-costumed groups, there is a lot of skin exposed during this event with most of the participants appearing almost naked. The Brazilian event also includes drums that boom across the streets with lots of dancing and night parties. The Carnival is the world's largest street celebrations.

The Mardi Gras celebrations also differ with other cultures such as the Fasching and the Karneval. They both began a little later than Mardi Gras. While Mardi Gras celebrations are similar, the Fasching celebrations vary from town to town. The parties are not organized events in Germany and are held in smaller groups at different places as compared to the Mardi Gras which is conducted in large groups and at designated and planned locations.

It is, therefore, important to note that the Mardi Gras celebrations have grown over the years and quite a lot has changed in how the celebrations are conducted. This has been due to influence from other cultures as well as the changing lifestyles across the globe.

In summation, it should be identified that Mardi Gras does not only focus on one-night stands but also exhibitionism (Gotham, 2005). However, in most cases, individuals that participate may not understand the fact that there are socio-political components to sexually charged cases; and it is usually more affirmative of social rules than rebellious. Certain researchers have placed emphasis on the description of Mardi Gras, indicating that it is a class-oriented ritual, considering some of its

features; for instance, masked aristocrats, casting beads, raised platforms as well as doubloons among others (Gotham, 2005). Considering this allegory, the upper social class is composed of the elite agrarian social structure; these classes provide rewards to the scrambling and the shouting peasants.

References

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