



Suzanne Schaefer  
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***Mardi Gras Indians***

**OVERVIEW:**

This unit is an examination of the Mardi Gras Indians, a unique African American subculture in New Orleans, Louisiana, who dress in ceremonial Native American costumes and parade through the city during Mardi Gras time. The style of art and music is embracing a cultural heritage, 10-15 generations removed, from their African origins—providing great spiritual and cultural identity. Beginning at least by mid-1800, this is an opportunity for the black culture of New Orleans to express a rich history of struggle, persistence and tradition. The black Indians represent one of the oldest cultural organizations of the area. Preserving African art and music in the New World dating back to the arrival of the slave ships while paying tribute to their Native American kindred spirits. Many cultural practices and traditions are passed along generation to generation orally and so much of the history of the Mardi Gras Indians remains a bit of a mystery.

The Mardi Gras Indians utilize music, costumes, speech and dance to collectively organize their ritualistic performance on Mardi Gras day each year. This practice is comprised of primarily African American men who mask themselves in ornate costumes representing the Plains Indians. The preparation of the costumes can take up to a year and cost thousands of the dollars. New costumes must be created each year because the previous years are usually destroyed after one last appearance on St. Joseph's day.

The tribes parade each year honoring the collaborative relationship with Native Americans. The Indians sheltered runaway slaves from their masters in pursuit of freedom and it was through this connection that the meshing of two cultures began. Many credit Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show appearances in giving the mock Indians the idea to dress in this manner. The tribes explain they wear "feathers as a show of affinity from one oppressed group to another, and to thank the Louisiana Indians for sanctuary in the slave days".

Typically, in white privileged circles, Mardi Gras participants form a krewe and name their parades after a mythological hero or Greek god. They use royalty as their ranking structures—for example King, Queen, Knight, Duchess, etc. Often the krewes are exclusive and by invitation only. Slavery and racism in the city created a cultural separation that prevented blacks to take part in the Mardi Gras festivities. To overcome this unequal bias, black communities began to organize and develop their own style of celebration. 'Gangs' formed in the neighborhoods and were named after Indian tribes, the leader referred to as the "Big Chief". The "Big Chief" enlists officers with titles such as "Little Chief", "Big Queen", "Fly Boy", "Medicine Man" and "Spy Boy". The tribes have between six and twenty plus members. The tribes generally operate separately from one another; however, there is a distinction between Uptown and Downtown tribes and today there are over 40 tribes. Probably the most famous Big Chief leader was Tootie Montana, who died of a heart attack at a City Council meeting in 2005. He had been masking for 52 years.

The black communities plan their own parade routes that are known only to them. The journey each tribe will take remains a secret between only those in the close-knit circle. It is often by chance that the groups encounter one another on their routes. It is not uncommon for tribes to congregate outside a Big Chief's house and await his tribe's arrival.

There was a period in time when the festivities turned toward violence and revenge. There were bloody battles fought on the streets between neighborhood gangs. Today, the competition focuses more on whose costume, lyrics and beats out performs the others. When the tribes meet up, the crowds are witness to a living theater of art and culture. Tribe members size up their counterpart, using a heel/toe glide, in a competitive yet friendly manner. The Big Chiefs face off last, in a slow, circular motion—with attention paid to the intricacies of the costumes. The role-playing is on display and considered a most important component of the competition. The question is which tribe has the most beautiful design, most detailed craftsmanship, better lyrics and strongest presence.

The Big Chiefs speak to one another with song or chant and they demand to bow and pay respect. The word "Humba" is the beginning of the battle. The response is a unique war dance, drawing from both African and Native American style, and reply of "Me no Humba, YOU Humba!". Drums, tambourines and other makeshift instruments accent this type of call and response narrative. The chants often utilize the Creole language and vary in tempo depending on the mood of the singers. The battle chants have made their way into popular music and the Indians style influence area artist for quite some time. There is incredible pride and respect for each other and their Native American "brothers/sisters" on display during this live theater in the streets.

"The contemporary Black Indian nation is organized into thirty-eight "tribes", which labor throughout the year to create magnificent suits consisting of intricate hand-beading, false gems and stones, and decorative feathers and plumes. These suits have been valued between \$20,000 and \$50,000 for their material and labor" (McKernan p. 222). The tribes, separated according to streets, gangs and family lines, are working-class folks who work all year long to honor the historical ties with Native Americans and the struggles they encounter in the face of racism in their city. Masking Indian is a civil rights protest aimed at segregation, white elites and keeping with the spirit of this most-famous celebration.

Similar to other ethnic traditions, this one is stressed and faces many hardships in surviving the constant battles in New Orleans. The participants of this tradition are poor, working-class blacks in neighborhoods that were destroyed by flooding and Hurricane Katrina. The existence of this special group risks extinction, as many families have had to relocate out of the city. Much of the equipment used to create the designs was destroyed. The art of making the 'suits' require a lot of skill, patience and sacrifice that may not be of interest to the younger generations. In addition, the pressures of recognition and commercial threats of the masses are

changing the art form. In some instances machines, rather than needle and thread, are used to create the costumes.

This most fascinating subculture of New Orleans is something to be preserved, cherished and most importantly, learned about by *all* Americans. Performances by Mardi Gras Indians are truly a magnificent historic African/Indian art form that can be celebrated by all, especially American youth. Instead of bringing a general Mardi Gras celebration into the classroom, make it a specific Mardi Gras Indian festival that teaches the historical importance of this group of black Indians.

### Historical Points of Interest (A Google timeline follows):

- **1722—Indian/Slave relationship begins.** In 1722, African slaves replaced Chickasaw, Choctaw and [Blackfoot Indians](#) as the first laborers who built [New Orleans](#). The Indians sheltered runaway slaves in the bayous until after the Civil War. The Black community never forgot that aid.
- **1746—Masking begins.** The earliest references to slaves dressed as Indians can be found in 1746. The current crop of *Mardi Gras Indians* became a powerful symbol of black pride in the racially tense atmosphere of the 1960s.
- **1771—The 'underground' parties.** In 1771, the [Free Men](#) of color were now holding parties in the back areas of the cities and in the Maroon Camps, during *Mardi Gras* celebrations, and still dressing with the *Indians*, while adopting their ways.
- **1885—Wild West Show comes to town.** The oral *history* of one *Mardi Gras* tribe, the Creole [Wild West](#), recounts that Becate Batiste, of African, French, and Choctaw descent, founded the group in 1885. In any case, African-American men adopted [Plains Indian](#) costumes in their *Mardi Gras* rituals.
- **1960—Mardi Gras Indian Music enters the scene.** The record broke big in [New Orleans](#), and absolutely buried poor Al Johnson's *Carnival Time* as the big *Mardi-Gras* record in 1960. After Banashak worked out a few kinks with national distribution, the song just ate up the R&B charts.
- **1970—More Music.** What's for sure is that this is one of the most full-tilt, drum-heavy songs to ever invoke the *Mardi Gras Indians*, and the wildest *Carnival* record up to that point.
- **2005—Racial tensions exist.** *March 19, 2005*, just last St. Joseph's Day, the police dispersed a crowd of *Mardi Gras Indians* and their supporters and followers. In the paper it was reported as being about 200 people. One of the police officers was quoted as having said: take them fucking feathers off or go to jail. That really conveys the attitude toward this tradition, that this is something that's not worthy of respect.
- **2006—The incredible Black Indian art form.** Her book *Amazigh Arts in Morocco: Women Shaping Berber Identity* was published by the [University of Texas](#) Press in *July of 2006*. She is currently working on a book about the Afro-Islamic aesthetics and ceremonial practices of the Gnawa that considers the *history* of the trans-Saharan slave trade and its implications on material culture in both western and northern Africa.
- **2010—Collaboration is warranted.** 7th Ward *Mardi Gras Indians*  
MATTHEW HINTON / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE  
*Mardi Gras Indians* are an irreplaceable part of New Orleans. A young [Mardi Gras Indian](#) of the Fi Yi Yi 7th Ward *Mardi Gras Indians* tribe dances on Pagner St. near the The Porch 7th Ward Community Center in New Orleans on *Mardi Gras Day, Fat Tuesday February 16, 2010*. That's why the New Orleans Police Department needs to work with the Indian chiefs to address complaints.

## **ACTIVITIES:**

### **Activity #1: Research and Hypothesis**

Instruct students to search “Mardi Gras Indians” for images on the internet. Ask each student to write down initial thoughts and descriptions what s/he sees and hears. Give students an opportunity to hypothesize about who they think the folks are in the images and what they are doing. Where do they think they come from? Are the costumes expensive? How often and when are they worn? It may be an option for each student to pick a favorite image to post in the class museum (see below).

After this initial search is complete, instruct students (individually or in groups) to complete the attached worksheet developed in conjunction with the Teaching the Levees website.

### **Activity #2: Art**

Design and create a Mardi Gras Indian headdress using images of current and past Indians. Identify the reasons why they mask themselves. Showcase them for the rest of the school to see.

### **Activity #3: Music/Performance**

Research, pen and perform a chant.

Present a mock battle of tribes—war of words and rhymes.

### **Activity #4: Museum (Teaching the Levees lesson plan)(M. Smith)**

As the class is reviewing the unit, create a “museum” in the room with images, facts and historical relevance of the Mardi Gras Indians. As students find interesting information have them explain, reflect and post in the “museum”.

### **Activity #5: Time Lining**

Create Mardi Gras Indians timelines. Research the importance of Native American and African American collaborations during the slave history in the south.

**Activity #6: Group Work**

Organize the class into krewes/tribes and have them work together to identify a name, create a costume, identify song and dance that will make them distinct. They can present the history, time and finances it may take and implications it has on society at large.

**Activity #7: Compare and Contrast**

Ask students to research other black cultural groups in the country, other subgroups in New Orleans or exclusive *invitation only* krewes and have them find similarities and differences between the groups.

**Activity #8: Movie and Discussion**

Watch the documentary, Tootie's Last Suit, and discuss the complex relationships, customs, rituals, music and history of the Mardi Gras Indians. Read the dialogue of the fateful City Council meeting and describe how that resonates with aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

**HANDOUT: RESEARCHING THE MARDI GRAS INDIANS (Provided by Teaching the Levees site)**

1. What are the historical origins of the “Mardi Gras Indians”? Are they actually “Indians”? Why did they originally decide to dress like “Indians”?
2. Describe several ways in which the Mardi Gras Indians merge African and Indian traditions.
3. What exactly is meant by the term “masking”?
4. What do the names of the various “tribes” represent?
5. What are the titles of the various roles/officers within each “tribe”? What are these titles based on?
6. Why might it be important for Mardi Gras Indians to participate in public festivals such as Mardi Gras?
7. What do people who are “Mardi Gras Indians” do the rest of the year (what sorts of jobs do they have, etc.)?

8. Why might the Mardi Gras Indians want to keep many of their traditions and practices secret?

9. What influence has the music of the Mardi Gras Indians had on popular American music, such as jazz and rhythm-and-blues?

10. Why are the Indians willing to devote so much time, energy, and money to creating the costumes for Mardi Gras, especially since most of them are far from wealthy?

11. Why is it important for each Indian to make his or her own costume, and why must there be a new costume each year?

12. How were the Mardi Gras Indians impacted by Katrina?

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Smith, Michael. Mardi Gras Indians: Culture and Community Empowerment. 29 November 2010 <[http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles\\_Essays/creole\\_art\\_mardi\\_indians.html](http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/creole_art_mardi_indians.html)>.

Smith, Michael P. Mardi Gras Indians. Pelican, 1994.

### Online Resources:

[http://www.mardigrasdigest.com/Sec\\_mgind/history.htm](http://www.mardigrasdigest.com/Sec_mgind/history.htm)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mardi\\_Gras\\_Indians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mardi_Gras_Indians)

[http://www.mardigrasdigest.com/Sec\\_mgind/What\\_is\\_a\\_MGIndian\\_tribe.htm](http://www.mardigrasdigest.com/Sec_mgind/What_is_a_MGIndian_tribe.htm)

<http://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/mardigrasindians.html>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKPmk4OCIBQ>

[http://www.callingallchildren.com/Mardi\\_Gras\\_info.html](http://www.callingallchildren.com/Mardi_Gras_info.html)

<http://www.teachingthelevees.org/?p=130>

[www.teachingthelevees.org/mardi\\_gras\\_indians\\_lesson.pdf](http://www.teachingthelevees.org/mardi_gras_indians_lesson.pdf)