

CREOLE CULTURE

The History of Creole Society/Family

There were three general groups that made up Creole society: 1) whites who were Creoles, Americans, and inhabitants of European origin made up the highest class; 2) free Blacks, emancipated slaves and their descendants made up the middle class; and 3) slaves who were household property, were the lowest class. The Creoles were the majority of the white population. They had a complex social organization, which included foreign groups such as Germans, Irish, and Spaniards whose names were given a French accent. The people who could trace their noble ancestors called themselves "Creole." Others were "chacas" or tradesmen, "chacalatas" or country folk (peasants), or "chacumas" for anyone with Black blood. All Creoles, no matter what level of society they were in, including slaves, looked down on the Americans.

In the Creole family the father was dominant. His word was law. He was not always a faithful spouse, but he was an indulgent parent. If he was a planter, he ruled his estate like a king. He had a large house, large crops, and a large family. He was a dutiful husband and accompanied his wife to balls, the theatre, and social events. He would go to the cafes to discuss business, play dominoes, and have a drink.

Historical Creole Gender Role

Young men were given their own quarters for entertainment purposes. They had mistresses who were Black or mulatto, but they couldn't marry them. Having a mistress was an accepted custom because marriages were usually business arrangements, not for love, and the men expected their wives to be passive and innocent lovers.

Men took fencing lessons, went horseback riding, dancing, or played cards. He would fight duels if necessary and preferred to die rather than be dishonored.

Girls needed a dowry and had to marry before they were twenty-five years old. They usually had a "coming out" during an evening at the Theatre d'Orleans, which marked the beginning of their search for a husband. The whole family attended the performance and sat in a box. Young men who were interested in the girl stopped by the box to pay their respects. They had intermediaries talk to the father and ask if they would be permitted to call on the girl at home. The first formal visit was brief, with the girl's mother and perhaps other relatives in attendance who would find out the young man's intentions. After four home visits the father asked the young man if he was serious about his daughter. If the young man wanted to marry the girl the two fathers negotiated the dowry. A notary came to write a list of the couple's possessions and drew up the marriage contract. Once the contract was signed, the families announced the engagement. The girl's family gave a big dinner at her house where the young man gave her an engagement ring. As a fiancée the young man could visit the girl whenever he wanted and take her out, but they were always chaperoned.

A few days before the wedding, the young man gave his fiancée a wedding basket with lacework (handkerchiefs, mantilla, fan), a cashmere shawl, gloves, and jewelry. She could not wear the jewelry before the wedding, nor could she leave the house for three days before the wedding. The Creoles liked to have weddings on Mondays or Tuesdays in Saint Louie Cathedral in New Orleans in the late afternoon. The bride wore a silk dress with pearls and lace. The veil was held in place with a crown of orange blossoms. The bride carried the same flowers in her bouquet. Later she left the bouquet in the church, put it on a relative's grave, or sent it to the convent where she studied. After the ceremony the members of the family signed the register. The guests then went to the bride's home for the banquet. The bride cut the cake and gave pieces of it to single girls to put under their pillows. When the guests began to dance, the bride and her mother went to the bridal chamber where she took off her wedding clothes and changed into her nightgown. The bride and groom spent their honeymoon in her parents' house. They were expected to stay in the bedroom for five days or more.

Creole Customs

Creole customs can be divided into two kinds: religious and non-religious. Religious customs focus on holidays: All Saints Day, Mardi gras and Easter, for example. On All Saints Day Creoles bring flowers made of white, black, or purple tissue paper to place on graves in the cemetery. The week before this holiday shops display crowns and crosses with black beads. Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday is celebrated on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of Lent.

At Easter, rabbits come out at night. The children try to stay up as late as possible, but they don't see the rabbits. The rabbit's nests are found filled with colored eggs both outside and inside the house. When the children find all the eggs, they have a contest of egg breaking. The child who breaks the egg takes it. The child with the most eggs at the end of the game is the winner.

Non-religious customs of the Creoles can be illustrated by two activities: 1) lagniappe, which comes from the Spanish word la napa meaning a sweetening. Grocery stores in Louisiana give a small addition to one's purchase, such as candy or small cakes as a token of appreciation to a customer; and 2) chiavari, which is a kind of celebration of the remarriage of a widow or widower. □

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