Christine Nielsen

MI-CARÊME: A HISTORY OF RECREATING RITUAL

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Economic transformations

In 1932 construction was completed on the Cabot Trail, the highway that encircles the northern tip of Cape Breton Island. Until then, the Acadian fishing village of Shacadie was largely isolated from all but the closest neighboring communities. Roads going in and out of town were rudimentary, and cars and trucks were all but nonexistent. Most transportation of goods and people happened by boat, and rarely. The building of the Cabot Trail was significant in that it facilitated the influx of automobiles to Cape Breton. It also came at a pivotal moment in Shacadie history when the Robin’s Company, which maintained almost total control over the fish coming out of Shacadie waters since its establishment in 1770, was usurped by community-established co-operatives.

At 92, Marie was the oldest of the residents I interviewed. Her father and two brothers helped to build the Cabot Trail. I spoke with her in the kitchen of the house her father built after their family, 17 children strong, was evicted from their land a short distance away. Before 1936, 25 Acadian families farmed and fished at Cap-Vert, on land that was subsequently reclaimed by the national government to become part of Cape Breton Highlands National Park. Though the stones of the houses were taken away and put to use elsewhere, the foundations of the homesteads still exist, overgrown but visible from one of the Park’s trails. New plaques stand in front of each one detailing the family name and how many children resided in each small stone square.

The landscape of Cap-Vert in its incarnation as National Parkland is, however, unrecognizable from that which Marie described to me from memory, while seated at her kitchen table. The painting of her family’s old farm, which now hangs in her living room, is perhaps the last visual reminder that a family of 19 once supported itself on that land. As Marie told me, the family itself was the main producer of its own means of existence. By the age of nine Marie was making the bread for dinner each week, and she recalls that her father made a stool in her living room, is perhaps the last visual reminder that a family of 19 once supported itself on that land. Marie and her sister Edith spoke some about which items were purchased and what was produced at home when they were growing up in Cap-Vert:

M: That’s what they did. They farmed. Most people lived on that, you know.
E: They lived on the farm. They didn’t have to run to the store everyday.
C: How often would you go to the store?
M: Maybe once a month, maybe one every six months. My father and them, when the winter came, the fall, he had enough money saved up ‘cause he worked. So he went to the store and he bought maybe ten bags of, you know, hundred pound bags of flour, a big hundred pound bag of sugar. They bought kerosene, there was no lights, there was kerosene lamps. They bought maybe, uh, three or four gallons of molasses. ‘Cause people liked molasses then. And my mother, she had a lot of hens, and you know what she used to do to have eggs all winter? She’ll have a barrel, and she’ll buy a bag—
E: Coarse salt.
M: —coarse salt, and she’ll put a row of salt and eggs and, you know like this? And she’ll fill the barrel until. And all winter she’ll have eggs!

Given this image of intense domestic production, it is not hard to envision how the ideal of self-reliance, born of a settler history, has remained within the collective imagination up until the present day. Even today, the richest Chéticantin I know of is Marie’s father worked as a crane operator for the income to purchase basic necessities. Like the majority of families then, his labor went to supplement the family’s labor and not the other way around. Marie and her sister Edith spoke some about which items were purchased and what was produced at home when they were growing up in Cap-Vert:

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further study. The co-operative movement in Shacadie saw its greatest upswing at the low point of the Great Depression. By 1936 Shacadie had co-operative fish-processing factories, a town credit union, as well as two co-op stores, one for fishing gear and one for household goods (1998:53-8). The success of these enterprises by the 1940s was such that, for the first time in centuries, the Acadians of Shacadie began to prosper financially.

Mi-Carême in a pinch

The celebration of Mi-Carême in Shacadie, just before the 1930s, was, as one might imagine, neither commercialized nor highly visual in its appeal. As there was no such thing as surplus within a household, the clothes worn for Mi-Carême were necessarily those so dirty and worn that they could not even be transformed into quilt fabric. Masks were made out of pillowcases or cardboard with holes cut for the eyes. In the absence of automobiles, the mi-carêmes were restricted to those houses they could reach on foot, and the likelihood of being recognized was quite high unless a mi-carême was successful in adopting strange postures and mannerisms.

Scarecrow Beau, a contemporary of Marie and the creator of what is arguably the area’s finest roadside attraction, was interviewed by Cape Breton’s Magazine before his death in 1996. Beau devoted the last decade of his life to the crafting of masks and scarecrows, at least 100 in total, and the fact that he still spend each summer displayed on his property, drawing crowds of tourists fascinated by the uncanny sight. Beau cites Mi-Carême as his inspiration for the scarecrows, as they are made out of the clothes and masks of mi-carêmes, and together form the same motley assemblage of nurses, fishermen, politicians, brides, and hockey players that one might see on the roadsides.

Describing the experience of Mi-Carême as it was celebrated during his formative years, Beau relates,
they won’t know who you are. So once your father’d take you down for about a mile and a half, two miles, then he’d drop off a bunch there. We weren’t only the family. If he came, there’s about 7 or 8, 10 kids get in the sleigh, and down we’d go. And then we’d start from there back home, going from house to house, you know. And the idea for the people at home was to try and guess who was under that outfit, the mask. (2004: 159)

Nearly everyone at this time would “welcome” the mi-carêmes into their homes. Because the community was smaller, and because of the restricted radius of Mi-Carême runners, welcomers knew to guess from a small number of people potentially hiding under the mask. As Beau tells it, serious precautions were therefore necessary to keep one’s identity concealed. “Because some of them [Chéticantins], they can guess—if they happen to see one eye, end of the nose, an ear-right away they’ve got you. Oh yeah, it’s unbelievable” (2004:160). One of the many notable differences between Mi-Carême and the comparable celebration of Chéticamp is that the maskers were not as welcome as they once were. The economic boom lasted, general speaking, until nearly the end of the century. In that amount of time the town itself grew and changed, compelling Chéticantins to change with it. In 1955, the Canso Causeway connected Cape Breton Island to mainland Nova Scotia for the first time, and cars gradually became inexpensive enough to be accessible to residents. Subsistence farming and indentedure (paid labor) was wiped off the landscape, replaced by international fish markets, cash, and a slew of profit-driven stores selling newly imported products. As a result, buying began to replace crafting in the habits of the youngest generation. Mi-Carême was to “run from house to house” in a restricted radius that maskers, welcomers knew to guess from a small number of people potentially hiding under the mask. As Beau tells it, serious precautions were therefore necessary to keep one’s identity concealed. “Because some of them [Chéticantins], they can guess—if they happen to see one eye, end of the nose, an ear-right away they’ve got you. Oh yeah, it’s unbelievable” (2004:160). One of the many notable differences between Mi-Carême and the comparable celebration of Chéticamp is that the maskers were not as welcome as they once were. The economic boom lasted, general speaking, until nearly the end of the century. In that amount of time the town itself grew and changed, compelling Chéticantins to change with it. In 1955, the Canso Causeway connected Cape Breton Island to mainland Nova Scotia for the first time, and cars gradually became inexpensive enough to be accessible to residents. Subsistence farming and indentedure (paid labor) was wiped off the landscape, replaced by international fish markets, cash, and a slew of profit-driven stores selling newly imported products. As a result, buying began to replace crafting in the habits of the youngest generation.

New commodity, new hospitality

The co-operative movement in Shacadie throughout the middle of the 20th century ushered in a new economic era. In former generations a fisherman would have worked his entire life for a company that kept him and his family living on the poverty line—never letting them drop to total destitution, but never allowing them rise to a higher standard of living. After the demise of the Robins Company, the boat’s captain could own his fishing license and sell his catch to a processing plant in which he had a stake. As the progenitors of enterprise and personal wealth as community-wide phenomenon, the first co-operatives of Shacadie were also, ironically enough, the harbingers of capitalism. The economic boom lasted, general speaking, until nearly the end of the century. In that amount of time the town itself grew and changed, compelling Chéticantins to change with it. In 1955, the Canso Causeway connected Cape Breton Island to mainland Nova Scotia for the first time, and cars gradually became inexpensive enough to be accessible to residents. Subsistence farming and indentedure (paid labor) was wiped off the landscape, replaced by international fish markets, cash, and a slew of profit-driven stores selling newly imported products. As a result, buying began to replace crafting in the habits of the youngest generation.

These changes can also be traced in the history of Mi-Carême, as store-bought or rented costumes replaced potato sacks and improvised outfits. Though the majority of Chéticantins did not attain affluence as defined by Canadian national standards, the face of poverty changed dramatically toward the end of the 20th century. This new, commodity-laden poverty brought with it new standards of hospitality, which were made visible at Mi-Carême each year. More than one resident told me a version of the following story. In the old days, when all a house had in it was a wooden bench and wooden floors, welcoming the mi-carêmes was no hardship. If people came in drunk and broke the bench, c’est pas grave, the bench could be fixed the next morning. However now that people have carpeting in their houses, they are averse to having mud tracked all over it. They fear seeing the television knocked over, or reject the social changes wrought by relative prosperity before it slipped from their grasp. In 1992, with North Atlantic cod stock levels deemed

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alarmingiy low, the Canadian government instituted a ban on all Atlantic cod fishing. The moratorium was expected to last two years, but in 1994, was then extended another five. The general consensus today, at least in Shacadie, is that the cod will not be coming back within the lifetimes of anyone currently concerned. As the resource upon which Shacadie was founded, and as the only natural resource that proved itself truly profitable for the Acadians who settled there, the loss of the cod has meant much more to the town than the loss of jobs.

It sometimes seems that when North Atlantic cod stocks ran dry, so did Shacadie’s wellspring of hope for the future. A profound sense of loss pervades the community today, tangible even to an outsider. I received different explanations for this depression, economic and individual, depending on whom I asked. Some drew upon the tragedies of Mi’kmaq history to explain their current crisis, saying that one cannot escape fate. Some wrote it off as a result of marginal, north country living—being removed from centers of production and activity for the long winters leads people to drink and despondency. Some blame it squarely on government, challenging the rationale behind fishing regulations and lambasting initiatives that tempt more and more working-age Maritimers to Alberta’s oil fields. Though the explanations vary for the current state of affairs in Shacadie, every single resident with whom I spoke provided the same answer to one particular question. When I asked, “Where do you see the town heading in the next five to ten years?” the answer was, without variance, “a retirement community.” Though I am generally suspicious of unanimity, it was hard not to be disheartened by the true residents cannot leave, and when they do, they leave not knowing if a return will be possible.

While the future of Shacadie and its historic inhabitants hang in the balance, every single resident I spoke to agreed that continued Acadian unity. As I have already shown, Mi-Carême celebrations have changed as natural adaptations to the changing face of Shacadie, “as a retirement community.” Though I am generally suspicious of unanimity, it was hard not to be disheartened by the lack of visible alternatives on Shacadie’s imagined horizons. Once done with their schooling, the young people who grew up on Cape Breton’s breathtaking shoreline are left out to sea. Even if those who leave to find employment elsewhere come back when their working days are done, will they speak French? Will they have kept up their fiddling through 70-hour workweeks in the Oil Sands? Will they run the mi-carême? There is a second, insidious Acadian Diaspora occurring today, a Diaspora based on economic necessity but threatening cultural obliteration. The predominant question is whether the community there, the loss of the cod, has meant much more to the town than the loss of jobs.

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Many residents leave this question open-ended, hanging between us: between me, the American fair-weather friend, and them. When I tell them that their home is a beautiful place and their music wonderful to my ears, what does that mean? My appreciation of their land and their cultural trappings can be nothing more than a fondness for skin-deep beauty. I take the lily pads and their upward-facing flowers from the lake, and in commenting on their beauty, I show my ignorance of all that lurks beneath. Fear, hopelessness, worry, and need are among the many realities of life in Shacadie I never contend with, which even as ethnographer I rarely bear witness to. I can leave as soon as the green on the trees gets too faded. I can and I do leave, and I can and I do come back. The true residents cannot leave, and when they do, they leave not knowing if a return will be possible.

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which had held the livelihoods of two hundred residents of Shacadie, went into receivership in May of 2006. For eleven weeks the two hundred laid-off employees were without paychecks, prospects, or unemployment benefits. In July of the same year, the plant re-opened under different ownership, though as to whether it was the owners themselves or simply the name of the company, which changed, is still the subject of much suspicion within the community. This suspicion, as the ethnographer Simpson, upon the local economy, since as a result many fishermen decided not to sell their catch to the local plant the next season.

In the summer of 2007, less than one hundred residents had work at the fish plant, and their hours were shaved down to a bare minimum. Francine, a Shacadie-Acadian woman who worked all of her life in the fish plant, did not find herself in the minority of workers who kept their jobs. However she herself considered lucky—perhaps even more so than the factory employees—now that she works at the Mi’Carême mask project, where she says working conditions are substantially better than at the fish plant.

F: Get up in the morning, you come here, you know what time you’re going home. At the fish plant you don’t know what time you’re going home. Sometimes we’re going home at ten, eleven o’clock at night. And by the time you go back to bed and get up to be there at the fish plant at five-thirty, it was a long summer. For me it was hard.

Long times I no longer expect anyone to know a single solid thing about Canada or its history other than what could be gleaned from an episode of Dudley Do-Right. In his famous chapter on the liminal experience of ritual, Victor Turner (1977:105) claims that chimerical masks and other such objects play an important part in helping ritual participants to question their assumptions about the order of the world as they enter into a new phase of life. Turner states, “Monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment that they have hitherto taken for granted.” Sitting in the gallery, however, the mask project employs approximately 25 people at any given time. Those with particular artistic talents, like Francine, are free to apply them, however the larger part of the women who work there have never picked up a paint brush in their lives. Nonetheless, they have all learned the craft of papier-mâché mask making, and each works independently on crafting “Mi’Carême” masks.

In the first ten months of the project, the workers-turned-artists produced more than 500 masks depicting diverse subjects: the Acadian flag, the fearsome southeast wind, a debonair, Santa Claus, a samurai. Some masks are painted with abstract designs. Some lay detailed scenic landscapes upon human faces. Some are more fancy than fanciful. It would almost be true to say that there are as many styles of mask represented in the gallery as there are masks. Presented together as they are, the masks elaborate a collective exploration of the medium itself. Taken one-by-one, each mask provides a small window into the imagination of the artist herself.

The pièce de résistance of the gallery is a full headdress of a moose, ensnared in a prominent corner of the main gallery space. Where each antler bifurcates, the tips become miniature mooose heads, each with its mouth agape and showing large white teeth and lolling red tongues. When I first encountered the piece, I was struck mostly by its hilarity. Four months into the writing of this ethnography, I now read the moose headdress as a fantastically executed statement on unidirectional conceptions of Canadian identity. In his famous chapter on the liminal experience of ritual, Victor Turner (1977:105) claims that chimerical masks and other such objects play an important part in helping ritual participants to question their assumptions about the order of the world as they enter into a new phase of life. Turner states, “Monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment that they have hitherto taken for granted.” Sitting in the gallery, however, the visitor is struck by its hilarity. Four months into the writing of this ethnography, I now read the moose headdress as a fantastically executed statement on unidirectional conceptions of Canadian identity. In his famous chapter on the liminal experience of ritual, Victor Turner (1977:105) claims that chimerical masks and other such objects play an important part in helping ritual participants to question their assumptions about the order of the world as they enter into a new phase of life. Turner states, “Monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment that they have hitherto taken for granted.” Sitting in the gallery, however, the visitor is struck by its hilarity. Four months into the writing of this ethnography, I now read the moose headdress as a fantastically executed statement on unidirectional conceptions of Canadian identity.

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There is an element of confrontation in this mask that is lacking in many of the others. The intended goal of the masks is to be sold to tourists, to be worn at a Mi-Carême party or, much more likely, to be displayed as art or artifact. With tourism at a low, though, and the museum all but unknown as far as Cape Breton attractions go, masks are accumulating much faster than they are sold, leading to tensions about the employment project’s long-term self-sustainability.

### Masking history

Though another local woman was responsible for writing the grant proposal and arranging for the project’s material needs to be met, Paulette is the artistic instructor and day-to-day supervisor of Acadie Masques. Paulette, who has never lived away from Shacadie, learned how to make papier-mâché masks from a Mexican folk artist who taught a mask-making course in the neighboring St. Joseph-du-Moine firehouse in 1989 and again in 1990. That same firehouse now houses the Acadie Masques workshop, the galleries in which the masks are displayed, and a petite “Mi-Carême Museum”—one room filled with old photos, journals, teapots, typewriters, and other memorabilia.

As previously mentioned, masks were not a particularly elaborate or fetishized element of Mi-Carême celebration until quite recently. Yet these masks are sold today as artifacts of Acadian culture, and specifically of a ritual celebration, which draws its inspiration from a brief piece of transcript is a story that often goes untold in the story

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Acadian culture. Similar efforts at preserving elements of culture through an imposed sense of unity have ended badly. In fact, the fight over whether school should be taught in French or a combination of French and English terribly continues, dividing the community along ideological lines.

Mi-Carême, however, is a community success story. The celebration has been more popular in recent years, with the community center receiving upwards of a thousand mi-carêmes on the final night of celebration. When Paulette says that she would rather come home for Mi-Carême than Christmas, she is not alone. The Mi-Carême season, as it has become, sees the return of many former residents who do not make the trip to visit Shacadie during its coldest holiday. Beyond the somewhat warmer weather during the week of its celebration, Mi-Carême also has the advantage of being fun. In an article on the subject of Brazil’s Carnival festivities, Victor Turner writes:

What we are seeing is society in its subjunctive mood—to borrow a term from grammar—its mood of feeling, willing, and desiring, its mood of fantasizing, its playful mood, not its indicative mood, where it tries to apply reason to human action and systematize the relationship between ends and means in industry and bureaucracy. (1983:104)

The atmosphere of Mi-Carême in Shacadie cannot fairly be equated with that of Carnival in Brazil, but the same general idea holds true. Mi-Carême is appealing as a tradition partly as a release from everyday hardship, and partly as a break from the everyday tradition of rationalizing hardship.

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Conclusion

Douglas claims that rituals “enact the form of social relations, and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society” (1970:153). This idea resonates with Turner’s proposed function of monsters in ritual, as intended to provoke thought rather than fear. What are left out of Douglas’s straightforward view of ritual symbols, however, are not only their mutability, but also their malleability. Ritual, as opposed to ceremony, is transformative; it shapes consciousness. However the repetition of ritual does not imply an assembly line of identical mindsets emerging from distinct “cultures” down through history. With repetition comes change, for as Drewal insists, “when ritual becomes static, when it ceases to adjust and adapt, it becomes obsolete, empty of meaning” (1992:8).

Drewal, Margaret Thompson

References


Douglas, Margaret Thompson

References


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Turner, Victor

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