

THE CONGO DANCE.

HOW NEW-ORLEANS NEGROES AMUSED THEMSELVES SIXTY YEARS AGO.

From the New-Orleans Picayune, Oct. 13.

The lazy tinkle of the bell on the ear mules, the drowsy drumming of the cicadae on the tall sycamore trees, and the green flat of sunlit grass trembling beneath the warm afternoon's rays, made Congo-square yesterday anything but a cool retreat. Sixty years ago, on a Sunday afternoon, Congo-square would present a very different appearance, and as the boys who then sported on the green are getting fewer and fewer every day, it is well worth the while to get from those with us a picture of this old landmark of our city for those who come after us. The square takes its name, as is well known, from the Congo negroes who used to perform their dance on its sward every Sunday. They were a curious people, and brought over with them this remnant of their African jungles. In Louisiana there were six different tribes of negroes, named after the section of country from which they came, and their representatives could be seen on the square, their teeth filed, and their cheeks still bearing the tattoo marks. The majority of our city negroes came from the Kraels, a numerous tribe who dwell in stockades. We had here the Minahs, a proud, dignified, warlike race; the Congos, a treacherous, shrewd, relentless people; the Mandringas, a branch of the Congos; the Gangas, named after the river of that name, from which they had been taken; the Hiboas, called by the missionaries the "Owls," a sullen, intractable tribe, and the Foulas, the highest type of the African, with but few representatives here. The slave trade, which had been abolished in 1807, was still kept up until as late as 1845 by cruisers which ran up the bayous and lagoons abounding on our coast, as safely deposited their cargoes at appointed places. Bayou Baratavia was a regular thoroughfare for this trade.

These were the people that one would meet on the square about 1816 and 1817. It was a gala occasion, these Sundays in those years, and not less than 2,000 or 3,000 people would congregate to see the dusky dancers. A low fence inclosed the square, and on each street there was a little gate and turnstile. There were no trees there then, and the ground was worn bare by the feet of the people. About 3 o'clock the negroes began to gather, each nation taking their places in different parts of the square. The Minahs would not dance near the Congos, nor the Mandringos near the Gangas. Presently the music would strike up and the parties would prepare for the sport. Each set had its own orchestra. The instruments were a peculiar kind of banjo made of a Louisiana gourd, several drums made of a gum stump dug out, with a sheep-skin head, and beaten with the fingers, and two jawbones of a horse, which when shaken would rattle the loose teeth, keeping time with the drums. About eight negroes, four male and four female, would make a set, and generally they were but scantily clad. It took some little time before the tapping of the drums would arouse the dull and sluggish dancers, but when the point of excitement came, nothing can faithfully portray the wild and frenzied motions they would go through. Backward and forward, this way and that, now together and now apart, every motion intended to convey the most sensual ideas. As the dance progressed the drums were thrummed faster and faster, the contortions became more grotesque, until sometimes in frenzy the men and women would fall fainting to the ground. All this was going on with a dense crowd looking on and with a hot sun pouring its torrid rays on the infatuated actors of this curious ballet.

After one set had become fatigued they would drop out to be replaced by others, and then stroll off to the groups of some other tribe in a different portion of the square. Then it was that trouble would commence, and a regular set-to with short sticks followed between the men, and broken heads ended the day's entertainment. On the sidewalks around the square the old negresses, with their spruce-beer and prairies of pea-nuts, cocoa-nuts, and popcorn, did a thriving trade, and now and then beneath petticoats bottles of tafia, a kind of Louisiana rum, peeped out, of which the gendarmes were oblivious. When the sun went down a stream of people poured out of the turnstiles, and the gendarmes walking through the square would order the dispersion of the negroes, and by gun-fire, at 9 o'clock, the place was well-nigh deserted. These dances were kept up until about 1819, but not later. Subsequently, however, the descendants of the original Africans got up an imitation, but it could not compare to the weird orgie of their progenitors.

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