Gumbo This: The State of a Dish

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Résumé

Gumbo a fini par représenter la Louisiane, en partie parce qu'il reflète et réfracte si parfaitement les complexités historiques d'où est né ce plat. La plupart des observateurs, peu importe s'il s'agit d'initiés ou de profanes, ont tendance à réduire le plat à une liste d'ingrédients. Cet article se propose de compliquer l'histoire et la nature du gumbo et, ceci faisant, affirmera que le " browning " est essentiel pour ce plat à la fois en termes de goût et en termes d'origines et de sens.

Introduction

When most people think of gumbo, they associate it with the Cajun and Creole peoples of South Louisiana. While the dish is most often associated with Louisiana, neither the name nor the idea for the dish itself is unique to the area.

The French word *gombo* comes to the New World from West Africa, where the plant was known as *(ki) ngombo* along much of the coast. Unlike the American word, *okra*, which derives from those African languages that knew the plant as *nkruma*, the French word does not refer only to the plant itself but to a larger cultural complex of practices and ideas that bear some elucidation below. Because of the African connection, there are also gumbos to be found in other parts of the United States, the Carolinas[1], for example, and Puerto Rico.

Gumbo has come to stand for Louisiana in part because it reflects and refracts so well the historical complexities out of which the dish emanates. Louisiana's colonial period saw the immediate introduction of enslaved Africans, who brought not only seeds for plants with them but ideas about what and how to prepare food.[2] The French and African settlers were, of course, pressing outward onto a landscape already occupied by Native Americans, who called the ground sassafras they used *kombo*, now known as filé, which begins to reveal the potential for linguistic and cultural mixing.

1 Cf. Stan Woodward, *Southern Stews: A Taste of the South*, n.p., Woodward Studio Limited, 2001.

2 New Orleans was founded in 1718 and the first slave ship arrived in 1719.

Into this colonial mix of peoples and ideas came two great surges: the Acadians and the Haitians. The impact of the latter group on the culture in general and the foodways in particular of New Orleans is not to be underestimated. Whites, slaves, and freed people of color doubled the population of the city overnight. They brought with them their preference for highly-seasoned food, probably the result of an Afro-Caribbean matrix, and for a pulse and starch dish which is similarly iconic in Louisiana: red beans and rice. The culinary revolution that took place as a result of the widespread employment of still enslaved Haitians as domestic help throughout New Orleans can only be compared to a similar phenomenon that took place in Italy in the 13th century when enslaved Mongolian domestics were the fashion which resulted in the pasta revolution according to at least one foodways historian.[3]

The first mentions of gumbo in the historical record appear right as the colonial period ends and the American one begins, which underlines the fact that the exact origins of Louisiana gumbo may be irretrievable.[4] Its form and nature, however, appear to have been established before the end of the colonial period: a thick, brown soup served over a starch. Since its development as a commercial crop in the late 19th century, rice has been the starch at the bottom of gumbo bowls. Before that, Louisiana cleft more closely to the rest of the South and the starch that gumbo covered was corn meal mush, known at first by the Native American term *sagamité* and later by the African-influenced *couche couche*, derived most probably from *cous cous*, which had been introduced in West Africa with the influx of Islam into the region. The tradition of a mush as the base starch in gumbo is maintained in some parts of Louisiana, with potato salad sometimes being scooped into a gumbo bowl to "soak up the rest of the gravy", as more than one individual interviewed has commented. The brownness of gumbo is really its essence, but how that brown is achieved varies by region and by dish. In some areas, cooks get the browning from the meat, in others from the roux. The color, consistency, and amount of roux is wildly variable, as is its place in the cooking process: Some cooks begin making gumbo with making the roux, then adding seasoning vegetables, and then water. Others already have a roux made, often a large bowl of it

[3] Reay Tannahill, *Food in History*, New York, Methuen, 1973.

[4] In commenting upon a party thrown in honor of the acting Spanish governor, Pierre Clément de Laussat noted, "You never saw anything more brilliant. A lovely atmosphere prevailed in all the drawing rooms. Entertainment lasted twelve hours. The guests danced boleros, gavottes, English dances, French and English quadrilles, and galopades. Eight tables accommodated card players and high-stake gamblers. Twenty oil lamps and 220 wax candles were burned. Sixty places were set at the main table, 24 at the small table, and 146 on 32 small round tables. In addition, hundreds ate standing up here and there. As a local touch, twenty-four gumbos were served, six or eight of which were sea turtle." Cf. Pierre Clément de Laussat, *Memoirs of My Life to My Son During the Years 1803 and After, Which I Spent in Public Service in Louisiana as Commissioner of the French Government for the Retrocession to France of That Colony and for Its Transfer to the United States*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1978, 86.

sitting in the refrigerator, and add the roux to boiling water, dissolving it spoonful by spoonful.[5]

Even this brief discussion of a few aspects of gumbo reveals the extreme variability and flexibility of the dish. It is, like any cultural touchstone, as much a focus for arguments as it is for agreement, with differences often being distinct across regions, towns, and even families. These differences are, in point of fact, more consistent than any of the more sweeping claims sometimes made between Cajun and Creole versions of the dish. It is more likely that Cajun and Creole neighbors in Lawtell will make gumbo in the same way, than it is that the Creoles of Lawtell and those of New Orleans will do so. As is the case with any number of folklore forms, gumbo reveals that there has always been a high degree of cultural integration in the South, even when social segregation was the law of the land.

The Gumbo Difference

It was, perhaps, inevitable that gumbo has become one of the most prominent icons of, and metaphors for, South Louisiana, and all this talk of food and difference is one way to prefigure a discussion of Cajun and Creole folkways, which have themselves largely been marked as different within the larger stream of American culture.

The exact origin of gumbo as trope is not entirely clear, but folklorists were some of the first to press it into service. In 1983, Barry Jean Ancelet deferred the origin of the idea to Marc Savoy when he noted that "Cajun music is a Louisiana hybrid, a blend of cultural influences with an identity which accordion maker and musician Marc Savoy of Eunice describes in culinary terms: 'It's a blend of ingredients, like a gumbo in which different spices and flavors combine to make a new taste'."[6] Later he would make the idea his own and use it in places like Pat Mire's film *Dance for a Chicken* (1993).[7] Nick Spitzer also used the idea of *gumbo* to mark a difference between Louisiana's own "gumbo culture" and the larger American impulses toward either a tessellated patchwork quilt or a homogenized melting pot, when he noted:

> Our own notion of cultural creolization need be neither classic liberal pluralism of bounded mosaic-like diversity and its sometimes inchoate spinoff into multiculturalism, nor the assimilationist melting pot of the prior generation. Instead it could be gumbo pots that hold the potential ingredients for creation and remaking of American

[5] In these latter areas pre-packaged rouxs have arisen and now appear on store shelves throughout South Louisiana: *Savoie's* is from Eunice and *Karey's* from Ville Platte.

[6] Barry Jean Ancelet, "Cajun Music: Its Roots and Development", in: Glenn Conrad (dir.), *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*, Lafayette, Center for Louisiana Studies, 1983, 195.

[7] Pat Mire, *Dance for a Chicken*, Pat Mire Films, 1993.

> culture(s). Pots of foreign ingredients – okra from Africa, sassafras from Native America, peppers from the Spanish circum-Caribbean, now all homegrown and stirred with a French sensibility – combined in a new domestic, or even virtual, common space, contributing to the creation of a sauce or roux while retaining essential aspects of their own group primordia.[8]

It is not entirely clear in this cultural kitchen how all this stirring and combining and saucing and spicing is supposed to work, let alone how it is different from any other place. But the idea of Louisiana's singular difference, as seen through the murky prism of gumbo, has taken root – roux? – and become so quotidian as to be the foundation for public sector marketing campaigns. For a time the state had as its appeal to tourists: "Come as you are; leave different." Closer to my own home, in the middle of the area billed as "Cajun Country" by many, the appeal is more direct: Saint Landry Parish promotes itself as "gumbo for your soul". Intertwined in these corrective offerings to whatever ails a potential visitor is the suggestion that Louisiana is different, that the difference cuts across a number of dimensions, and that the difference can be as easily consumed, and digested, as a dish.

Essential Wisdom

I note all this in order to begin to get us thinking about the essentialization of difference that the gumbo trope risks. Perhaps I am overly sensitive to the topic, since I am a member of a discipline that has, in its history, trafficked in essentialisms that have led to some unfortunate results. The tendency to imagine Cajuns as isolated and thus uniquely different is one such essentialism against which we must guard.

For one, Cajuns and Creoles are not alone in possessing the secret of gumbo in the New World. There are, as I noted earlier, gumbos in the Carolinas and guigumbos in Puerto Rico. For another, even during their most deeply "insulated" periods, Cajuns and Creoles were well aware of larger national or global trends. I remember looking through the famous Vermilion parish fiddler Varise Conner's record collection and noting his love of blues and jazz. And those who have heard the Louisiana Folk Masters CD of Conner have heard him play a polka, a mazurka, and a tune with the title of "You Better See Your Momma Every Night or You Won't Have No Momma At All". The song is a blues; the family name is Irish; the language he spoke was French. During the same time that this musical mixing occurred, the Federal Writers Project collected recipes from around the region, many of which reveal that the most popular fish among Cajuns and Creoles in the 1930s was not catfish nor crawfish but canned salmon. It appears in a variety

[8] Nicholas Spitzer, "Monde Créole: The Cultural World of French Louisiana Creoles and the Creolization of World Cultures", in: *Journal of American Folklore* 116 (2003), 69–70.

of dishes: salmon cakes, salmon balls, salmon croquettes, salmon bisque. All of them are traditional in form, but obviously the forms themselves are more open to new contents than our discussions about them would indicate.

And yet, essentialisms live on. Even recent reference texts like the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* reveal a willingness to treat a nuanced cultural domain like cuisine as something easily swallowed whole. Opening up the current edition of the *Encyclopedia*, one finds:

> The heady, aromatic soup that goes by the name of gumbo is the product of varied cultures that produced this hybrid of southern cuisine. From Africa comes its name – ngombo, the Bantu word for okra. The herbs, spices, the carefully chopped and sautéed seasoning vegetables, the seafoods, meat, fowl, and the rice with which it is always served come together in a nourishing and enticing amalgam that is unique to the region.[9]

It's a pretty good beginning: The laundry list of ingredients suggest the diverseness of the dish. The author, however, quickly shrinks the diversity down to two, Cajun and Creole, limiting Creole cooking to a style "practiced in the areas in and around New Orleans" (this particular essentialism drives the Cane River Creoles and the Creoles of the Louisiana Prairies to no end of distraction). Given such a limited perspective, it is no surprise that what the author ends up with is the conventional bifurcation of South Louisiana cooking:

> As in any kitchen dispute, there are as many theories as there are cooks, but the usual difference between a Cajun and a Creole gumbo lies in the "roux." Browning flour in fat (slowly, slowly stirring all the while) creates a roux and in Cajun gumbos this is a necessary thickener. Creole gumbos rely mainly on vegetable aids for thickening, with a much thinner roux if one is used.[10]

Such sweeping generalizations about the adjectival form of "Cajun" and "Creole" completely ignore the actual people who, using the singular and bounded nominal form, call themselves "a Cajun" or "a Creole". In either case, individuals tend to practice traditions that have more in common with their geographic neighbors than with a larger imagined, and super-local, ethnic community. As noted above, Creoles living in Lawtell make a gumbo that has more in common with their Cajun neighbors than Creoles living in Lake Charles, let alone the Creoles of New Orleans or the Creoles of Cane River.

The rest of the *Encyclopedia* entry is much the same, a goodly mix of food writing with an eye to some of the recent scholarship. In all honesty, the limited nature of the writer's perspective merely echoes our own oversights in this area. The prob-

[9] Carolyn Kolb, "Gumbo", in: Charles Reagan Wilson – William Ferris (dirs.), *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1989, 502.

[10] Kolb, in: Wilson – Ferris 1989, 502–503.

lem with foodways is that they tend to blur distinctions and differences, making claims about ethnicity and authenticity a lot more difficult. Ethnicity and authenticity have been the focus of a good deal of scholarly discourse, which has tended to seek them out in order to support claims to resources for the groups with whom they work. The *Encylopedia* entry participates in this scholarly tradition. It is also representative of the larger food writing tradition, which regularly extends the bifurcation beyond the simply ethnic into the geographic. In a number of cookbooks I examined over the course of my research, Cajun cuisine was often described as something like "rustic", "hearty", and "simple". Creole cuisine, reflecting the trend to imagine Creole as restricted to New Orleans, was often described as "complex", "sophisticated", and "urban".

The Nature of Variation

My home discipline of folklore studies has, as one of its founding precepts, the idea that people are, or were, arranged on the landscape into something like "natural" groups, that geographic boundaries or limiting features would focus people's interactions in such a way that discrete cultures would develop and be maintained. Such a binding of the historic to the geographic has seemed to hold true across a number of folklore forms in South Louisiana. Barry Jean Ancelet, and a number of others, have investigated various dimensions of historic-geographic phenomena over the years. One of the most visible, in a spectacular way, is *le courir de Mardi Gras*, the Mardi Gras run, found in and around the towns of Mamou, Eunice, Church Point, and elsewhere. Many readers will be familiar with the spectacular urban carnival form of New Orleans Mardi Gras. The country Mardi Gras is more like the mumming traditions of Europe: a rural procession that moves from house to house within a communally-determined territory and performs various kinds of small dramas in exchange for money or other forms of wealth which will help the touring group to host a gumbo to which all who contribute are invited.

Ancelet had, in his work on the *courir de Mardi Gras*, begun to develop an idea about the territories marked that he called *petits mondes*. When I first set out to trace the gumbo lines of Louisiana, I imagined they existed like Ancelet's *mondes*. He and I even sketched out some of the possible territories based on previous fieldwork, travels, and experiences, demarcating the zones with bounding lines where a certain behavior or ingredient seemed to drop out. There would be a seafood line, which would mark the outer limit of access to fresh coastal goods up to the moment of readily-available refrigeration. There was, to our minds, a smoke line, which reflected what we perceived was a northern Acadiana preference for smoked sausage and a southern regional preference for fresh, often called *green*, sausage in gumbos. Somewhere there was a garlic line, because we had both no-

ticed that garlic was fairly prevalent on the eastern side of the Atchafalaya Basin and on its western edge, but that by the time one got to Crowley, any attempt to put garlic in gumbo could provoke a fight.

Over the next few years I conducted dozens of interviews with older cooks, mostly women but also a number of men, and with their audiences, trying to map patterns of ingredients, preparation, and consumption. I also conducted literally hundreds of smaller interviews, read through a fair amount of archival material, and polled students about family foodways.

What I eventually discerned was that while there were certainly larger cultural geographies to be glimpsed, on the ground regional differences were less clear. I came to think less and less in terms of lines and more and more in terms of vectors, impulses, horizons. That is, there is no line, physical or imaginary, that one crosses and the use of garlic drops. Instead, I can, with a fair amount of certainty, tell you that as one moves closer to the Bayou Têche, the chances of garlic being a basic ingredient in gumbo rises exponentially. Conversely, as you move away from the bayou and westward across the Louisiana prairies, garlic drops out.

The presence of garlic along the Bayou Teche, on the western side of the basin, and its paired presence along the Bayou Lafourche on the eastern side of the basin is rather readily explained by the presence of Italian immigrants. It also explains the more *mire poix*-like seasoning ingredients of onions, celery, and bell pepper, a medley preferred by Italian American cooks across the nation. And the presence of smoked meats in the northern part of Acadiana is probably not a result of the Germans who settled in the area, as was long thought, but more likely dates back to the settlement of what is now northern Saint Landry Parish by immigrants from Fort Toulouse in Alabama, as Carl Brasseaux has documented so clearly.[11]

All assertions about larger foodways trends must, then, be qualified by the movement of families and of individuals around the landscape. People move for any number of reasons – the Alabamons foreshadowed the Acadians in being settled in one area and quickly declaring their preference to be elsewhere. When people move, they bring with them a certain set of traditions that they can cause to spread and they simultaneously acculturate to the traditions of their new neighbors. Over the last twenty years, a number of Louisiana studies have begun to make clear that a more thorough ethnography of the region really reveals something like microecosystems of ideas and behaviors that are, much to the chagrin for any analyst desiring a comprehensive and complete landscape, always already in motion.

[11] Carl Brasseaux, "Opelousas and Alabama Immigrants", in: Carl Brasseaux (dir.), *A Refuge for All Ages: Immigration in Louisiana History*, Lafayette, Center for Louisiana Studies, 1996, 103–116.

There are, however, some larger assertions to be made within the frame of a history difficult to discover and a geography too jumpy to do justice. Some of that work has been done in C. Paige Gutierrez's *Cajun Foodways* and in Brasseaux's *Stir the Pot*.[12] Gutierrez's work is admirable in attempting a kind of synthesis of a folklore form, especially something as complex as a foodway. Her survey is contemporaneous in scope, trying to capture what was the state of Cajun foodways at the time of her study, though in seeking a synthesis she misses some of the distinctions already mentioned above.

Both Gutierrez and Brasseaux occasionally admit that Cajun foodways might be part of larger trends. Both recognize, for example, that pork and one-pot, stewed dishes are part of a larger Southern pattern. Brasseaux is particularly good about distinct trends that affected Cajuns on the western side of the Atchafalaya Basin, an area he knows extremely well. One of the best examples of this, and perhaps the greatest shift in Cajun foodways since the arrival in Louisiana and their initial adaptation to the local ecologies, is the displacement of corn by rice as the base cereal, or starch, in the Cajun diet.

The corn mush consumed by the colonial French and later by the Cajuns was in fact a Native American inheritance. Its later appellation of *couche-couche* is surely derived, as I noted above, from the name that some West Africans would have used, comparing it to the dish they knew, *couscous* (in an interesting twist of fate, *couscous* in Mali was made from rice). The word that the colonial French used was *sagamite*, which appears to be a word that spans a number of native language families, suggesting a late introduction to North America. Early gumbos were served over this corn mush, a situation that did not change until "Midwesterners in search of economic opportunities in the South relocated to Cajun country and helped to transform the region's agricultural base from corn production and ranching to rice cultivation"[13].

The Gumbo Engine

Returning to my previous comments about impulses often left out of inventories of ingredients, methods, and dishes is a delineation of a rather consistent culinary aesthetic. The conventional wisdom among the literati about gumbo is that "first you make a roux". A more careful survey of gumbo preparation reveals that this is simply not true. And it is not true across a wide span of gumbos. Ignoring gumbo *des herbes* for a moment, the first thing you do in any gumbo is brown something.

[12] C. Paige Gutierrez, *Cajun Foodways*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1992; Marcelle Bienvenu – Carl Brasseaux – Ryan Brasseaux, *Stir the Pot: The History of Cajun Cuisine*, New York, Hippocrene Books, 2005.

[13] Bienvenu – Brasseaux – Brasseaux 2005, 111.

What you brown, how you brown it, and how much of that browning reveals itself in the final dish varies across regions, cooks, and kinds of gumbos. Browning is the one aesthetic impulse that transcends all gumbos. It is the gumbo engine, the thing that makes food go in Cajun foodways.

During the early colonial exchange, browning served as a convergence point for the three folk cookeries (Native, French, and African).[14] While the French and Africans arrived with the practice of browning in roasting meats, it was the Native Americans who perhaps suggested that cereals could be browned. While on a war trip with the Arkansas, Jean-Bernard Bossu noted:

> They do not worry much about food supplies. Everyone is provided with a little sack of corn flour or maize roasted in just about the way we roast our coffee. When they are hungry, they mix some of the flour with a spoonful of water, but generally do not eat it until they have come close to the enemy.[15]

We know from Bossu's account as well as from others that European settlers quickly took over many Indian folkways.[16] Within a short time of the colony's establishment, Europeans were raising plants like maize and tobacco. They used the same waterways for the same reasons as the Indians did and selected the same places for establishing settlements. There was considerable continuity from Indians to Europeans. This description of a grain being browned may be the origin of the Louisiana roux, where the flour itself changes color and not the butter, as in the classical French roux. What happens in a Louisiana roux is that the flour grains themselves are browned in the fat before liquid is added. The browned grains still behave as normal when liquids are added, absorbing and expanding to cause the characteristic thickening of many gumbos.

So what does browning do? When vegetables like onions, which are high in sugars, are browned, caramelization results. When meats are exposed to high heat, something called the Maillard Reaction occurs. During the Maillard reaction, carbohydrates and amino acids combine in a number of new compounds. Some

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[14] For fuller accounts of the Acadian and African immigrants, cf. Carl Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia: The Beginnings of Acadian Life, 1765-1803*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 1987, and also Carl Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1877*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1992, as well as Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1992.

[15] Jean-Bernard Bossu, *Travels in the Interior of North America, 1751-1762*, translated and edited by Seymour Feiler, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1962, 64.

[16] For those interested in a larger history of the indigenous roots of Southern stews, cf. a later remark in Bossu's text which discusses his encounters with a dish called chili: "The natives, as I have already said, lived on dried and smoked game, roasted or boiled with corn ground in a hardwood mortar. This food, called chili, is very tasty and healthful. When I went up the Mobile River with the Indians, I lived for about two months on this food. I can assure you I never felt better than I did during this period." Cf. Bossu 1962, 218.

create flavor. Others create color. "Burned" is the wrong end of this spectrum of possibilities, but everything short of it adds depth to the dish's flavor. Taking a little bit of food and making it go a long way both in terms of nutrition as well as in terms of flavor is something Louisiana cooks all seemed to have agreed upon early in the colony's existence.

Throughout my research, what I came across again and again is that browning is foundational to Cajun and Creole foodways. In some ways, the *ur*-dish of the region is not gumbo but rice and gravy. Pork steak. Brisket. Meatballs. Even cowboy stew with potatoes: All are served over rice and with gravy. What distinguishes one region from another are the stages of browning. In the northern Acadiana parishes, for example, the meat of a gumbo is typically browned and then it can be kept in the pot or set aside when water is added. A roux is prepared in a second pot, or at a different time (and kept in a bowl in the refrigerator) and then it is slowly added to the water and stirred in, dissolved thoroughly. In the southern parishes, west of the basin, "first you make a roux" and then you add seasoning vegetables, then water, then meat: The notion of "first you make a roux" is so famous that it was the title of a 1954 cookbook published locally in Lafayette.

This preference for browning may, in part, come from the roasting practices of 17th-century French cookery. The other method for cooking meat during this time would have been, of course, the *chaudron*, or kettle, in which one would have cooked soups or stews. This was the cookery that the people who were to become Acadians took with them to the New World. Over the next one hundred and twenty years, Acadians would continue to raise certain old world crops and develop tastes for new ones. By the time of the deportation, Acadian lands yielded bumper crops of wheat, cabbage, apples, grapes, carrots, and corn and supported hundreds of heads of cattle. The Acadians had also learned, from the MicMacs, how to use bear oil as a seasoning and as a cooking fat whereas in France the fat of choice would have been butter or goose fat. In Louisiana, they would come face to face with a very different cookery, one in which fat has a third use, frying. With the addition of West African foodways to the mix, the browning triumvirate – Native American parching, European roasting, and West African frying – was complete.

Conclusion

With the storms of 2005 and the emergence of yet another diaspora – one reminiscent of *le Grand Derangement* and the Middle Passage in scope –, I decided to shelve my research into the state of gumbo in Louisiana. Initial media distortions about criminal acts – e.g., snipers shooting at rescue helicopters or people looting stores – became national clichés, which ignored on the ground realities that some

people were taking diapers and baby formula and some people were shooting guns in a desperate attempt to signal their need for help (the use of guns as signaling devices is part of a number of southern folk cultures). No one seemed to care that the bleaching of the city was also a draining of the city's chief cultural engine. The billboard on Interstate 49 that proclaimed "gumbo for your soul" seemed a lie designed only to lure in tourists and feed them a watered-down soup with no meat worth eating.

It reminded me of that moment in Ada Jack Carver's short story "The Old One" first published in 1926.[17] The story is told from the point of view of an old woman, Nicolette, who is battling her grandson's avaricious wife. The grandmother has raised her grandson, Balthazar, in the Creole community of Isle Brevelle, along the Cane River of northwest Louisiana. The grandson's wife, Rose, something of an upstart from outside the community, desires to sell the old woman's bed in order to buy a car, a device Nicolette sees only as a vehicle for the young woman to be even looser than she already is. The grandson, and husband, is of course unaware of the power struggle and is for the most part firmly under his wife's sway. At one point in the story, the two women have reached an impasse and both await Balthazar's return to plead their cases. Nicolette waits outside, where she has taken up residence since being moved, along with her bed, to the back of the house. The granddaughter waits inside, where the narrative voice, closely allied with the grandmother, tells us she "moved about in the kitchen, lifting potlids and rattling dishes. She was knowing and sly, that Rose; and Granny knew what she was up to. She was making gumbo for Balthazar. Rose could be sweet when she wanted to."[18]

The narration of the events of that evening are not given. Nothing else needs to be said. The passage makes clear that the power of persuasion lies with the gumbo. The phrasing underlines the intertwining of Rose's womanly wiles with the dish: We are told not that she was making a gumbo but that "she was making gumbo for Balthazar". Rose's slyness and cunningness are not served directly to her husband, but in a dish. In common parlance, Rose is "cooking up something", and to be most effective, that something is a gumbo.

Such a mordant view of things might seem dramatic, but it serves to balance the sometimes overly cheerful rendering of gumbo itself as a kind of localized-to-Louisiana version of the American patchwork, where everybody cheerfully adds something to the pot from which everyone will happily, and fully, draw his fill. Such renderings flatten out the interesting interleavings of peoples and cultures. The

[17] Ada Jack, "The Old One", in: Mary Dell Fletcher (ed.), *The Collected Works of Ada Jack Carver*, Natchitoches, Northwest State University Press, 1980, 119–134.

[18] Carver 1980, 110.

gumbo exchange falls hard on the heels of the Columbian exchange, which itself follows the exchanges that took place between Africa, Europe, and the Near East during the expansion of Islam and later the early European explorations. I leave this essay with a possible beginning for further study: Is it possible that okra itself got to West Africa through Muslim travelers? There are many more connections to explore, many more questions to answer.