

Document #1764-09-04-01 – Mama Comba's *Gombeau*

K4BL Abstract: In *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, Dr. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall argues this document offers the first Gulf Coast reference to gumbo (“*un Gombeau*”) in the archive.ⁱ This is the testimony of Mama “Julie” Comba,ⁱⁱ a fifty year old *négresse*, an African woman of the Mandinga Nation who lived in the Hospital for the Poor (*L'Hôpital des Pauvres*) and was enslaved to the Capuchin priests. Mama Comba appears before the French Superior Council in this, her second interrogation, as a result of the arrest of two runaways, the *négre* Cézár, and the *négre* Louis, called Foy (*dit* Foÿ). The runaways were caught and accused of murder, but ultimately charged with public drunkenness, theft and firing weapons into the air (no one was killed), and with being fugitives. Mama Comba was interrogated because she hosted a feast that Cézár and Louis were guests at, bringing with them a pig that Louis allegedly stole and that the guests all took part in cooking and eating. The document below is drawn from part of Mama Comba's testimony.

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Origin - New Orleans, Province of Louisiana

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Names: Black - Cézár; Comba, Mama "Julie"; Louis *dit* Foy; Foÿ; (Cantrelle), Louison; (de Lafrenière), Fatima; (Baschemin), *négresse*; “many Bambara *négres*”; “another *négresse*”

Names: White - Cantrelle, M.; D'Abbadie, Jean-Jacques; Foucault, Denis-Nicolas; de Lafrenière, M.; Mandeville, M.; Daneville, Dame; Baschemin, Sr.; Garic, Jean-Baptiste; Fazende, Jacques

Names: Native - n/a

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Transcription (French, diplomatic)	Translation (English, modern)
[feuille 1 recto] [digital 3]	[page # 1] [digital 3]
[Marginalia:] pre paye [Rubrica, Foucault] 4 Septembre 1764 Interrogatoire de la négresse Comba	[Marginal note:] Pre-paid [Rubric, Foucault] September 4, 1764 Interrogation of the <i>négresse</i> Comba
[Corps:]	[Body:]
N. ^o 1835 Du 4. 7. ^{bre} 1764 Interrogatoire fait par nous Conseiller Commissaire En Cette partie a La Requette du procureur General Du Roy et En Vertu de L'ordonnance de Monsieur Dabbadie, a La Negresse nommée Comba Contre Le Negre nommé Louis accusé et tenu a prison de Cette Ville ainsi qu'il ensuit	No. 1835 of September 4, 1764 Interrogation made for the Advisor Commissioner in the petition of request by the Advisor General of the King and in virtue of the order of Mr. D'Abbadie, of the <i>négresse</i> named Comba against the <i>nègre</i> named Louis, detained in prison in this city as follows:
A Eté Emmené de prison La Negresse nommée Comba demeurant a L'hopital des pauvres, Laquelle après serment par elle fait de Dire Verité fus laquelle seroit par nous interrogée L'a été ainsi qu'il ensuit	Taken from the prison, the <i>négresse</i> , named Comba, stays at <i>l'Hôpital des Pauvres</i> [Charity Hospital]. After taking her oath, she says she will speak truth when questioned by us, as follows:
Interrogée de Son nom age qualité et Demeure a Dit S'appeller Julie autrement Comba agée	Questioned of her name, age, and her residence, she said she is called Julie, otherwise Comba, aged

<p>de Cinquante ans nation manenga demeurant a l'hopital Des pauvres</p>	<p>fifty years, of the Mandinga Nation, living in Charity Hospital.</p>
<p>Interrogée Si elle Connoit Le nommé Loüis ou foÿ a Dit qu'elle Le Connoit depuis qu'il a til dans du pais Cÿ et non pas auparavant</p>	<p>Questioned if she knows the named Louis, or Foÿ, she said that she has known him since he has been in this country here, and not before.</p>
<p>Interrogée depuis quand elle n'avoit pas vü Le dit Loüis a Dit ne L'avoir pas Vü depuis deux mois qui etoit avant d'estre mise en prison</p>	<p>Questioned since when she had not seen the said Louis, she said not to have seen him for two months, because she has been placed in prison.</p>
<p>Interrogée Commant est la quelle Connoissoit Louis a Dit qu'après que Loüis fus dessendü des illinois elle avoit Coutume D'aller Souvant Voir Louison Dans Le Jardin Cantrelle, qu'un jour elle ÿ füt Eele ÿ füt et ÿ trouva plusieurs Negres Bambaras qu'ils S'amuserent beaucoup.. qu'ensuite La Negresse Louison fut La chercher une autre fois</p>	<p>Questioned how she knows Louis, she said after Louis left Illinois, she was accustomed to go to see Louison at Cantrelle's garden. One day, she was visiting and found there to be many Bambara <i>nègres</i> [there]. That they had a very good time, then the <i>négresse</i>, Louison, went to look for her another time.</p>
<p>[Signé:] Fazende [Signé:] Garic, Greffier</p>	<p>[Signed:] Fazende [Signed:] Garic, Notary</p>
<p>[f. 1 verso] [dig.4]</p>	<p>[p. # 2] [dig.4]</p>
<p>qu'elle ÿ Retourna et qu'elle ÿ trouva encore Le negre Loüis qu'ils ÿ Souperent ensemble, que La négresse</p>	<p>That she returned there, and that she found the <i>nègre</i>, Louis, that they suppered there together with the <i>négresse</i></p>

<p>nommée fatema appartenant a M.^r de Lafrenière avait préparé Le Soupér, qu'alors elle dit a Louis quetce qu'il fezait La qu'il etois marron, que Louïs Luy dit qu'il etois Dessendu avec Sa Maitress des illinois qu'il n'etois pas marron qu'elle Luÿ dit Commant Li gagner a vivre puis que iL ne travaillait point que Le dit Louis Luÿ dit que Sa maitress Le Laissoit Libre parce quil avoir mal a une Jambe et Jusqu'à ce qu'il fut Guerÿ que pour manger Il n'en manquait point qu'il en trouvoit par tout dans La Ville; adit Depuis que Ladite Louison avoir permission de Son maitre pour le Souper Où ils ne mangerent que Du Cochon qui apartenoit aLa Nègresse Louison</p> <p>Interrogée S'ils etoient plusieurs A Dit quilts etoient plusieurs mais qu'elle ne Les connnoit point</p> <p>Interrogée si elle na Jamais vü Le dit Louis a l'hopital des pauvres adit quelle L'y a vü plusieurs fois.</p> <p>Interrogée Si Le negre Louis n'avoit pas Couchée avec elle Dans Sa Cabane A Dit qu'ouÿ qu'il ÿ avoit Couché qu'elle ne Scavoir Pas qu'il fut marron</p>	<p>named Fatima, belonging to Mr. de Lafreniere, who had prepared the supper. She then told Louis what was he doing there, that he was a maroon, that Louis told her that he had come with his mistress from Illinois, that he is not a maroon. That she asked how he earned a living since he does not work, that the said Louis, he said his mistress let him live free because he has a leg injury, and until he was cured, only to eat what there was no shortage of, that he found around the city. He said that the said Louison had permission from her master for the supper, where they only ate pork which belonged to the <i>nègresse</i>, Louison.</p> <p>Asked if they were several, she said they were several but she does not know how many.</p> <p>Asked if she ever saw the said Louis at the Hospital for the Poor, she said he had been there many times.</p> <p>Asked if the <i>nègre</i>, Louis, had not slept with her in her cabin, she said that yes, that he had slept there, that she did not know that he was a maroon.</p>
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<p>Interrogée Si elle ne Luy avoir pas donné un Gommeau avec Cezar et une autre negresse a Dit qu'on y Cela etoit Vray qu'ils etoient quatre Interrogée que Cezar meme Donna a Louis Cinquante sols pour aller chercher Le filet qu'il y fut et Burent tous ensemble</p> <p>[Signé:] Fazende [Signé:] Garic, Greffier</p> <p>[f. 2r] [dig.5]</p> <p>Interrogée Si Louis ne Luÿ avoit pas donné une Carotte de tabac a Dit qu'ouÿ qu'il Luy en avoit Donné une mais qu'il La repris apres quil en avoit Volé Dix avec de La toile Dont il a fait des chemises et des Culottes qu'il ne Se Cacheoit point quil Les Cousoit devant La porte de L'hospital qu'elle Luÿ avoir donné des Eguilles</p> <p>Interrogée Si Elle ne Scait pas Si Louis avoirVolé ailleurs A Dit qu'elle Scait que Louis avoit Vollé des hardes A LaNegresse au Sr. Baschemin, mais qu'il avoit Ensuite vendu Les hardes mais non pas L'argent qu'il avoit Volé aussi qu'il L'avoit employé en <i>taffia</i>.</p>	<p>Asked if she had given him some gumbo with Cézar and another <i>négresse</i>, she said it is true, they were four, that Cézar gave Louis fifty <i>sols</i> [money] to go find the <i>filet</i> [of alcohol] that he went [to get it], and they all drank together.</p> <p>[Signed:] Fazende [Signed:] Garic, Notary</p> <p>[p. #3] [dig.5]</p> <p>Asked if Louis had not given her a <i>carotte</i> [small amount] of tobacco, she said that yes he gave her some but that he took it back, having stolen ten along with some cotton linen, from which he made shirts and pants. This he did not hide. He sewed in front of the door of Charity Hospital, that she had given him the sewing needles.</p> <p>When asked if she knew if Louis had stolen from anywhere else, she said she knew that Louis had stolen clothes from the <i>négresse</i> of <i>Sieur</i> Baschemin, but that he had then sold the clothes, but not the money that he had also stolen, that he had used to get <i>tafia</i> [Creole rum].</p>
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<p>Interrogée Si elle na pas sçut que Louis avoir Volé un Cochon aux Jesuites a Dit que Cela etoit Vraÿ que Louis avoit tué un Cochon, mais Comme Ce Cochon etoit gros il ne Peut Le faire Sortir par dessus La palissade que Luÿ et Cesar Le partagerent, et chacun fu passer sa portion, par dessus La palissade et que Louïs fut vendre La Sienne au bayou qu'au surplus Ce Louis Luy en Donna un morceau qu'ils mangerent ensemble tous Les Deux.</p> <p>Interrogée Si elle na pas Connoissance que Le negre Louis au volé ch'z La Dame Daneville a Dit qu'etant a Laver au fossé elle avoir vü beaucoup de Linge a secher dans Le Jardin au S.[^]r Cantrelle qu'elle avoit demandé a Louison Si elle avoit Lavé qu'elle Luÿ dit que non, que Cetait du Linge au Negre Louis, mais que Ce Linge</p> <p>[Signé:] Fazende [Signé:] Garic, Notary</p> <p>[f. 2v] [dig.6]</p> <p>N'avoit Jamais été porté chez elle.</p> <p>Interrogée Si elle n'a pas Connoissance que Le negre</p>	<p>Questioned if she knew if Louis had stolen a pig from the Jesuits, she said it was true Louis had killed the pig, but that this pig was so big he could not get it over the palisade. That he and Cézar shared it, and each passed their portion over the palisade. And Louis went to sell his share at the bayou. Of what was left, Louis gave him a piece that they ate together, the both of them.</p> <p>Questioned if she did not know that the <i>nègre</i>, Louis, had stolen from the home of the Lady D'Anville, she said that she saw the washing in the ditch, and a lot of clothes drying in the garden of <i>Sieur</i> Cantrelle. She asked Louison if she had done the washing, the she had said no, that it was the clothing of the <i>nègre</i>, Louis, but that the clothes</p> <p>[Signed:] Fazende [Signed:] Garic, Notary</p> <p>[p. #4] [dig.6]</p> <p>were never to be brought to her home.</p> <p>Questioned if she knew that the <i>nègre</i>, Louis, was often sleeping at the</p>
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<p>Louis Couchoit souvent chez Louison dans La Cabanne ou jardin de Cantrelle</p> <p>a Dit que depuis que Louis etoit dessendu des illinois</p> <p>il Couchoit dans Lad.^e Cabanne ou ch'z elle quil y avoit même Couché plusieurs fois</p> <p>qui est tout Ce qu'elle a Dit Scavoir.</p> <p>Lecture a elle faite du present interrogatoire</p> <p>aDit Le bien entendre Ses reponses Contenir Verité</p> <p>Et y a persisté et Na Sçu Signer</p> <p>[Signé:] Fazende [Signé:] Garic, Greffier</p>	<p>home or garden of Cantrelle,</p> <p>she said since Louis came from Illinois,</p> <p>he sleeps in the said cabin or at her place.</p> <p>That he had slept there many times, that is everything to her knowledge, she said.</p> <p>The present interrogatory was read back to her she said she understood it, her answers contained the truth,</p> <p>persisted in this, and did not know how to sign.</p> <p>[Signed:] Fazende [Signed:] Garic, Notary</p>
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Please note that what appear to be typos (missing spaces, abbreviations, misspellings, strikeouts, superscript) appear in the original manuscript, but are corrected in the more modernized translation. For more on our editorial practices see [insert xxx link here].

i. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). See also, Dominique Rogers, *Voix d'esclaves: Antilles, Guyane et Louisiane Françaises, XVIII^e-XIX^e siècles* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2015).

ii. Mama Comba's name evokes the Senegambian goddess who emerged during the slave trade, *Mame Coumba Bang*, or *Maam Kumba Castel*, and rules the waters of Saint-Louis and Gorée, respectively. She and other Vodun deities are retained in the pantheon of Louisiana Voodoo. For more on West African religion and culture in Louisiana, see Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; Ibrahima Seck, *Bouki Fait Gombo: A History of the Slave Community of Habitation Haydel (Whitney Plantation) Louisiana, 1750-1860* (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2014); Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022).