

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

**K4BL Storyset:** 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.<sup>1</sup> This is the testimony of Mama “Julie” Comba,<sup>2</sup> 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 *nègre* Cézár, and the *nègre* 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.

<https://www.lacolonialdocs.org/document/10603>

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Names: Black - Cézár; Comba, Mama "Julie"; Louis *dit* Foy; Louison (Cantrelle); Fatima (de Lafrenière); *négresse* (Baschemin); “many Bambara *nègres*”; “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  
Keywords - Charity Hospital, crime & punishment, disability, fugitivity, imprisonment, kinship, marronage, material culture, nation, womanhood

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<sup>1</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> 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 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).

Transcription (French, diplomatic)	Translation (English, modern)
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<p>[feuille 1 recto] (digital 3)</p> <p>[Marginalia:] pre page [Rubrica, Foucault] 4 Septembre 1764 Interrogatoire de la négresse Comba</p> <p>N.º 1835 Du 4. 7.<sup>bre</sup> 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</p> <p>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</p> <p>Interrogée de Son nom age qualité et Demeure a Dit S'appeller Julie autrement Combaagée de Cinquante ans nation manenga demeurant a l'hopital Des pauvres</p>	<p>[page # 1] (digital 3)</p> <p>[Marginal note:] first page [Rubric, Foucault] September 4, 1764 Interrogation of the <i>négresse</i> Comba.</p> <p>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:</p> <p>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:</p> <p>Questioned of her name, age, and her residence, she said she is called Julie, otherwise Comba, aged fifty years, of the Mandinga Nation, living in <i>l'Hôpital des Pauvres</i> (Charity Hospital).</p>
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Interrogée Si elle Connoit Le nommé Louïs ou  
foÿ a Dit qu'elle Le Connoit depuis qu'il a til  
dans du pais Cÿ et nous pas auparavant

Interrogée depuis quand elle n'avoit pas vü Le  
dit Louïs

a Dit ne L'avoir pas Vü depuis deux mois qui  
etoit avant d'estre mise en prison

Interrogée Commant est la quelle  
Connoissoit Louis  
a Dit qu'après que Louïs 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

[Signé:] Fazende [Signé:] Garic, Greffier

[f. 1 verso] (dig.4)

[Marginalia:] deux<sup>e</sup> page  
[Rubrica, Foucault]

qu'elle ÿ Retourna et qu'elle ÿ trouva encore  
Le negre  
Louïs qu'ils ÿ Souperent ensemble, que

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.

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.

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 *nègres*.  
That they had a very good time, then the  
*nègresse*, Louison, went to look for another  
(good) time.

[Signed:] Fazende [Signed:] Garic, Notary

[p. # 2] (dig.4)  
[Marginal note:] second page

[Rubric, Foucault]

That she returned there, and that she found  
the *nègre*,  
Louis, that they suppered there together with

La négresse nommée fatema appartenant a M. <sup>r</sup> de Lafrenière avoir	the <i>négresse</i> named Fatima, belonging to Mr. de Lafreniere, who had
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<p>preparé Le Soupér, qu'alors elle dit a Louis que ta qu'il</p> <p>fisoïn 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</p> <p>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 Guery 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 Oü ils ne mangerent que Du Cochon qui apartenoit</p> <p>aLa Nègresse Louison</p> <p>Interrogée S'ils etoient plusieurs</p> <p>A Dit quil etoient plusieurs mais qu'elle ne Les connoit point</p> <p>Interrogée si elle na Jamais vü Le dit Louis a l'hopital</p> <p>des pauvres</p> <p>adit quelle L'y a vü plusiers fois.</p> <p>Interrogée Si Le negre Louis n'avoit pas Couchée avec elle Dans Sa Cabane</p> <p>A Dit qu'on y qu'il y avoit Couché qu'elle ne Scavoir Pas qu'il fut marron</p> <p>Interrogée Si elle ne Luy avoir pas donné un Gombeau</p>	<p>prepared the supper. She then told Louis that he should</p> <p>take care if he was a maroon, that Louis, he said, 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</p> <p>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</p> <p>to the <i>nègresse</i>, Louison.</p> <p>Asked if they were several,</p> <p>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</p> <p>for the Poor,</p> <p>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,</p> <p>she said that they were there, that he had slept there, that she did not know that he was a maroon.</p> <p>Asked if she had given him some</p>
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	gumbo
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<p>avec Cezar et une autre negresse  a Dit qu'on y Cela etoit Vray qu'ils etoient  quatre <del>Interrogée</del> 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)  [Marginalia:] trois page  [Rubrica, Foucault]</p> <p>Interrogée Si Louis ne Luÿ avoit pas donné  une Carotte de tabac  a Dit qu'on y qu'il Luy en avoit Donné une  mais qu'il La repris apres quil en avoir Volé  Dix avec de La toile Dont il a fait des  chemises et des Culottes  qu'il ne Se Cachoit point quil Les Cousoit  devant La porte de L'hospital qu'elle Luÿ avoir  donné des Equilles</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 taffia.</p>	<p>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 tenderloin that  they had, and  they all drank together.</p> <p>[Signed:] Fazende [Signed:] Garic, Notary</p> <p>[p. #3] (dig.5)  [Marginal note:] third page  [Rubric, Foucault]</p> <p>Asked if Louis had not given her a <i>carotte</i>  (small amount) of tobacco,  she said that 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 where she  gave 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 Sir Baschemin,  but that he had then sold the clothes, but not  for money. He stole so that he could use it for  some <i>tafia</i> (Creole rum).</p>
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Interrogée Si elle na pas fut que Louis avoir  
Volé un Cochon aux Jesuits  
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.

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.<sup>r</sup> 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

[Signé:] Fazende [Signé:] Garic, Notary

[f. 2v] (dig.6)  
[Marginalia:] quat.<sup>e</sup> page

[Rubrica, Foucault]

N'avoit Jamais été porté elle.

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.

Questioned if the did not know that the  
*nègre*, Louis,  
had stolen from the home of the Lady  
Daneville, she said that she saw the washing  
in the ditch, and a lot of clothes drying in the  
garden of Sir Cantrelle. She asked Louison  
if she had done the washing, the she had said  
no, who said  
it was the clothing of the *nègre*, Louis, but that  
the clothes

[Signed:] Fazende [Signed:] Garic, Notary

[p. #4] (dig.6)  
[Marginal note:] fourth page

[Rubric, Foucault]

were never to be brought to her home.

Interrogée Si elle n'a pas Connoissance que Le  
negre

Louis Couchoit souvent ch'z Louison dans La  
Cabanne ou jardin de Cantrelle

a Dit que depuis que Louis etoit dessendu des  
illinois

il Couchoit dans Lad.<sup>e</sup> Cabanne ou ch'z elle  
quil y avoit même Couché plusieurs fois que  
est tout Ce qu'elle a Dit Scavoir.

Lecture a elle faite du present interrogatoire aDit  
Le bien entendu Ses reponses Contenir Verité Et y  
a persisté et Na S'en Signer

[Signé:] Fazende [Signé:] Garic, Greffier  
Questioned if she knew that the

*nègre,*

Louis, was often sleeping at the  
home or garden of Cantrelle,  
she said since Louis came from Illinois,  
he sleeps in the said cabin or at  
her place.

That he had slept there many times,  
that is everything to her knowledge, she said.

Reading to her this interrogation,  
she said of course her answer contains the truth,  
and she insisted she not sign.

[Signed:] Fazende [Signed:] Garic, Notary