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Immigrant Integration through Festival: Technical Prowess, Empowerment and Inclusion in the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival in Rambouillet, France

Cozette Griffin-Kremer

An example of a particular town-centered maying custom in France indicates how participation in traditional festivals can work as an effective tool in social integration for individuals or groups, who find a place in their new communities through engagement in associative work. Some newcomers, however, cannot break into this positive spiral, in contrast to the active participants in the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival in Rambouillet, France. The emphasis here will be laid upon the participation of festival float-builders, their sense of cooperation and belonging, as well as their pride in carrying on what they always term 'the tradition' taken on from the example of 'elders'.

Savito, gegužės mėnesį vykstančio *Pakalnučių* festivalio Rambujė mieste (Prancūzijoje) analizė atskleidė, kaip dalyvavimas tradiciniuose festivaliuose gali būti veiksminga priemonė socialiai integruoti individus ar grupes. Jie suranda vietą naujose bendruomenėse įsitraukdami į kolektyvinę veiklą. Tačiau kai kuriems naujai atvykusiems imigrantams nepavyksta sėkmingai įsitraukti, priešingai, nei aktyviems *Pakalnučių* festivalio Rambujė mieste dalyviams. Straipsnyje daugiausia dėmesio skiriama festivalyje dalyvaujantiems specialių festivalio pasirodymo (parado) „priemonių“ kūrėjams, jų bendradarbiavimo ir priklausomybės bendruomenei jausmui bei didžiavimuisi tuo, jog tęsia tai, ką jie visuomet vadina iš „vyresniųjų“ perimta „tradicija“.

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Festivals and leisure time, regarded at the scale of a town, provide an opportunity to meet actors personally, be they in the municipal government or in one of the many associations active in local events such as a festival like the 'Fête du Muguet' (Lily-of-the-Valley Festival) in Rambouillet, France. Associations are an integral part of civil life in France, where well over one million such groups are

said by official government sources to exist (*Conférence de la Vie Associative* undated; Archambault, Tchernonog 2012: 1), and they are legally open to both French citizens and recent immigrants in various stages of integration into civil society. In the case of the Rambouillet town festival, the Portuguese community is highly active, having two associations that participate in the lily-of-the-valley *fête*, mobilizing both long-time residents and citizens, as well as more recent arrivals from Portugal, and even being recommended by the town official responsible for associative life as the leading example of commitment to the town's most traditional emblematic festival¹. The information about the Rambouillet event has been gathered over the years since 2005 from research in the town and *département* archives (Griffin-Kremer 2011), regular recording of local press articles and through a series of interviews with over a dozen representatives of the town and territorial administration, from the Mayor (also the President of the French Senate), to the local Parliamentary Deputy, and on to the officials responsible for various services or other major actors in the festival, such as the local communications agency, the town's orchestra and band group, which has pride of place in the festival ongoings, and the direct participants in the float parade (Griffin-Kremer 2014).

The main discussion undertaken here is a new angle on one of the many aspects of the local event: how it facilitates integration of members of an immigrant community, in the broader context of such integration in France, a topic thus far not widely researched in connection with maying activities, although an impressive amount of work has been done on the notion of minorities and their integration, or lack of it (Laithier, Vilmain 2008). Becoming what any individual might esteem to be a 'full' member of society is at times a daunting task in any *polis*, in the face of the visible or invisible challenges of class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and so on. Perhaps what is most impressive in many societies is that their members rise to these challenges and carry off social and economic integration of long-time residents as well as newcomers, if not always smoothly, but nonetheless, often effectively. For 'developed' areas of the world, integration of immigrants is usually to the great economic benefit of the host countries, but statistics attesting to this often leave aside the more subtle measurement of what might make people feel they 'belong' (Coghlan 2015: 5). Participation in festive events, holidays – religious or other – and local, national or supra-national allegiances can contribute much, as exclusion from them can do the opposite.

¹ Crozier Joëlle, Conseiller Municipal, Délégué à la Vie Associative et aux Fêtes, personal communication, May 2013.

A festive event many people in France judge to be typically French is the giving of lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis* L., *Tela Botanica*; *Convallaria majalis*, NCBI) on and around May Day, a practice that can be observed all over the country, with some distinct nuances on regional levels, where there are at times strong local customs maintained with pride and acute awareness of differing from the national trend (Griffin-Kremer 2009: 145–154). May Day lily-of-the-valley is an affair of considerable proportions and there are regular online statistics from private and government agencies on the commercial impact which the flower-raising and selling activities involve (Griffin-Kremer 2015: 4). The national event was in full swing from the late nineteenth century on, although May Day was not declared a legal holiday until 1947 and is today the only obligatory holiday in the calendar (*La Fête du Travail* 2015; *Service Public* 2015).

The latest statistics for the national May Day lily-of-the-valley sales are for 2014, included in the overall purchase of indoor flowers (*végétaux d'intérieur*), amounting to 26.5 million euros, a 1% decline from 2013 figures. The lily-of-the-valley has the giant's share, at 98% of the flowers bought and 95% of the outlay in cost, in the form of potted plants or cut flowers (*Les achats...* 2015). The flower is grown by professional market gardeners mainly in the region so famed for it that the *muguet* has become a trademark of sorts: the *Muguet Nantais* (lily-of-the-valley from the Nantes area), one of the so-called 3-Ms of the region along with lamb's lettuce (*Valerianella locusta*) and Muscadet wines (*muguet*, *mâche* and *muscadet*). Producing flowers to bloom for a single three or four-day May Day period is an exacting and highly scientific undertaking and they are grown both in open fields or in greenhouse conditions, usually under vast stretches of plastic 'tunnels'. A corollary of this massive production is the short and intense harvesting of the some 60 million sprigs, which involves all kinds of labor, from retirees and students to immigrants and refugees, numbering some 6,000 'hands', among them, around 4,500 seasonal workers in the Nantais area each year (Chesnais 2015), and this does not include the more dispersed production of growers in other areas of France.

How to find work that is more than temporary for immigrants to Europe is a politically charged issue discussed well beyond the present borders of the European Union, and the broader subject of integrating immigrants over time in the *République* is the object of an entire museum in Paris, where the history of immigration is traced out through all available media (*Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration* 2015). This includes valuable statistical analysis by government researchers presented by periods characterizing the trends. From 1891 on, immigration to France in the service of industrialization called upon near neighbors, in descending order of Belgian, Italian, Swiss, German. For the period of reconstruction begun after World War I with a peak in 1931, immigration was mainly

from Italy, Poland, Spain and Belgium, but expanded to a broader 'European reservoir' of recruitment. By the 1970s period of modernization, sourcing was extended to post-colonial networks, but still headed up by Europeans, in this case, the Portuguese, followed by Algerians, Spaniards and Italians. By the 2000s, the trend towards urbanization swept up immigrants in the order Algerian, Moroccan, Portuguese and Italian, as the four main examples given (Durand, Benoît, Mitrano 2008). This means there is an important Portuguese contingent in France, around one million people, and they will provide the example of major actors in the Rambouillet town festival later here (*Immigration portugaise* 2015).

Integrating newcomers into the workings of 'Republican values' is also a major preoccupation, expressed both in the international press and in a recent report by the President of the French Senate (Dickey, Kashi 2012: 128–147; Larcher 2015). Some newcomers, however, cannot break into this positive spiral as easily as others. The May Day commercial activity provides a stark contrast to the town festival in matters of integration, because the national-level holiday renders 'visible' people who usually are not – the suddenly numerous dark-skinned street sellers, especially in large cities. Their work in the daytime for May Day has a year-round parallel at night. Among the fleeting faces one notices in the evening in many Parisian restaurants, holding out roses for sale, there is another 'community' – the Bengalis who are most commonly undeclared residents. They often rely on the roses and a massive selling of lily-of-the-valley around May Day in order to survive. Unlike the Portuguese with their European status, at least nominal Catholicism and a Romance language adaptability, the Bengalis have not (on the whole) moved into even the beginnings of integration and are often noticed only when they become especially visible, for May Day, as it is the only day when street selling is officially 'tolerated', within the boundaries of certain restrictions (Vincent 2013; Girard-Oppici 2015; Muguet... 2011). They provide a striking counter-example to the highly visible participants in the Rambouillet festival.

The May Day festivities involve flower gift sales in the street and professional florist shops, market stands, gardening centers and at growers' own outlets (Figure 1). There is an overflow of offerings – sidewalks are often impassable due to the sellers' stands. May Day has a true holiday air and sellers, just as their buyers, may be any age or come from quite far outside the cities or towns for the day, at times offering 'extras' from their own home production or gathering, such as camembert cheese or wild asparagus (Figure 2). May Day once represented the high point of profits over a three-day period for professional florists, who sell everything from sprigs to luxury arrangements for executive suites, though this has been overtaken in very recent years by Mother's Day sales. The lily-of-the-valley remains the major fund-raising activity for groups such as the Communist



Figure 1. At the Eden Flor florist shop on May Day 2015 (Photo by Cozette Griffin-Kremer)

Party and the Red Cross (Figure 3), who have to work hard to keep up with demand, usually making their bouquets of sprigs right on the spot in nearly production-line discipline. The amount of skill involved in street selling is limited by legal restrictions allowing only the most strict simplicity, so this provides the greatest contrast with the Rambouillet town festival floats.

The mid-May Lily-of-the-Valley Festival (*Fête du Muguet*) in the town of Rambouillet can hardly be qualified as a commercial event, and its participants at all levels usually term it, affectionately, 'traditional'. It celebrated its centenary in 2006, having begun embryonically even before its official 1906 inauguration. Just how immigrants and their families might effect and consolidate their sense of belonging by participating actively in a festival event can be seen in an important, very public, part of the Rambouillet fête – building and displaying one of the *muguet*-decorated floats in the parade called the *corso fleuri* (floral floats). Their technical prowess – explicitly and widely discussed – entails recognition, a sense of empowerment and inclusion.



Figure 2. Father and son from Auxerre selling muguet and wild asparagus May Day 2015 Gare Montparnasse
(Photo by Cozette Griffin-Kremer)

The members of the Portuguese community in Rambouillet who participate actively in the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival do so in a context highly distinct from the more general May Day-centered custom of simply purchasing the *muguet* as a bringer of happiness and good luck. They invest their time and enthusiasm devotedly and nearly all year round, in the challenge of the float parade, which can involve a remarkable level of know-how. (There are two Portuguese associations, only one of which will be taken as an example here.) In both the highly commercial May Day lily-of-the-valley customs and the festival in Rambouillet, there is a shared objective, often unstated, of bringing pleasure to other people. In the town festival, this can be without actually giving them the flowers, aside from sprigs occasionally tossed from the parade floats to the spectators. Of course, the float parade itself is only one event during the *fête*, and preparation for the floats is nestled in a months-long program of work. There is another high point of the year directly connected with the town's Lily-of-the-Valley Festival – the election of the Queen and her two Dauphines in January, who will ride on the final float in the parade during the festival in mid-May. Many of the associations



Figure 3. Red Cross volunteers selling in Vanves May Day 2015 (Photo by Cozette Griffin-Kremer)

involved in float-building also participate in the election, which takes place during the ball called 'La Nuit du Muguet' (Lily-of-the-Valley Night). Participation by members of the Portuguese community has been so high that they have often been rewarded with a Queen over the years, and 2015 was no exception, when a high school senior actually from Portugal was elected.

The election ball marks the 'climb' towards the climax of the fête in mid-May, which is announced well in advance in all the town's media coverage, from magazine to cultural program and on to the posters in shop windows and billboards at every corner. The two-day fête's 'animations' include street music, a formal concert preceding the coronation, a fireworks display, very extensive fun fairs, a smaller procession from town center to church, a midday cocktail party in the town gardens and the highlight – the float parade or *corso fleuri*. Over recent years, the Rambouillet Lily-of-the-Valley Festival has had a theme each year, running from the cinema, through the Far West, carnivals, and on to the 2015 'animated cartoons', decided upon by the piloting committee in the town hall associations section and announced in early December. Float-builders



Figure 4. Construction of the Amis des Fêtes float entitled Scooby Doo in May 2015
(Photo by Cozette Griffin-Kremer)

then immediately begin thinking through their own specific choice of subject and how to take that from two-dimensional plans on paper to full-scale three-dimensional – and *per force* very sturdy – structures.

In addition to the considerable work devoted to constructing the various figures, vehicles or buildings represented on the float platforms, getting the floats ready for the parade in the weeks before can involve gathering 30,000 to 40,000 *muguet* plants. This can be done anywhere in the nearby forests, but most especially in the Presidential domain, the Pheasant-Raising Woods (*La Phaisanderie*), open for a complete afternoon to the various teams who come to gather for each of the eight to fourteen float-builders associations. Long before this afternoon of hectic activity – the Friday before the Sunday parade – the two Portuguese teams have set up with others in the town's Hippodrome (race course) hangar to begin work, but not usually from scratch. The town provides the float platforms, but the experienced builders have kept much of their material from the

year before and adapt it to their new theme. In 2015, the Portuguese team of the 'Amis des Fêtes' (Festival Friends) Association chose to do the popular cartoon figure of Scooby Doo and the Mystery Machine (Figure 4). This involved making the famous 'machine' (a magical van with everything from ice-cube maker to supersonic jet-launching platform – in a nutshell, whatever the Scooby Doo team members might need to resolve yet another challenging mystery) and the major character, the dog, Scooby Doo. Team members wore costumes and wigs to bring the cartoon characters in the cast to life during the parade.

The aspect that the Festival Friends team – and others among the float-makers – aim most especially at is living up to what they term 'the tradition' of fine-quality work on the floats, which they inherited, appropriated very consciously from the 'elder' statesmen and women who had retired from float-making (Griffin-Kremer 2015: 11–13). One of these 'elders' especially undertook to pass on the skills and techniques that had been the pride of earlier parades. Some of these 'old hands' still come to lend their help and expertise to the fastidious folding and pasting of the plant's leaves through the week before the *corso fleuri* and then the last-minute addition of the flowers. The work involved must be seen, to be believed, and the result effectively constitutes a gift from each and all of the teams to the town community, who either look on from home or line the streets from the parade's starting point, then on to the high street and the final destination at the castle grounds.

Among the spectators, there are many friends, much discussion and the ultimate, quiet compliment from an old-time float-builder or town resident to *some* of the float-builders: 'not bad, not bad at all'. Of course, among the float teams who work side-by-side, there is much emulation and this extends to everyone, even those who keep their exact theme choice a carefully guarded secret, until they have all made their much-awaited 'coming out' at the departure point. The newspaper reports before the parade on Sunday are careful not to publish photographs showing more than a small part of any float beforehand. So, there is suspense, both in the reception of the work by the onlookers more generally and in the skills displayed by the experts. The parade plays a central role in how the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival is perceived by the people who attend, who like to count on it being a leisurely pleasure (weather permitting!) and this is the specific intention of the float-builders. The guiding light of the Festival Friends Association puts it very simply, and explicitly: 'we want the festival spirit to give pleasure to people, so they have a good time'².

The Festival Friends Association does not limit itself to the Lily-of-the-Valley fête, and also participates in community activities such as helping run the town skating rink, having a *crêpe* stand each weekend beside the temporary Christmas

²Marques Sidalina, personal communication, 17 May 2013.

ice rink downtown, participating in the biennial autumn Saint Lubin Festival by having a specialty Portuguese treats stand and dressing in that fête's period costumes. Their participation in the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival float-making is mainly a family affair plus friends, and the two Portuguese association groups are well represented at the Muguet Night Ball in January. They rejoice, when their candidate is elected Queen. The older team members – usually only about fifty years old now – remember arriving in France, and especially their first day at school, when they did not speak or understand a word of French. Today, there is a play of recognition, reward and intensified commitment based on their prowess as float-makers and role as the leading inheritors of 'the tradition' of skills from the older generation of float folk.

It is but one aspect of an integration process of a group that sees itself as distinct, if discreet, in an urban setting, but they have chosen to be active players and make themselves visible through the quality and whole-hearted commitment to their work, and most especially in the shared pleasure it brings. They have found one road to success, a road among many others, and their vehicles in the case of the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival in Rambouillet are creativity, team cohesiveness, reiterated determination and a ready-made tool that the French perceive as typically French, very handy for people from outside seeking to become accepted – a forest flower, a geophyte that hugs the ground and must thrive before its competition casts it into shadow. The Portuguese team, like all the other float-makers, brings the *muguet* into town, to be seen for a few fleeting hours, after hundreds of hours invested in the work. They have also found a thread that resonates among French people, as a rule, and they cite it willingly, without giving it further definition – 'the tradition', which they practice, rather than preach.

Notwithstanding the wealth of the archives possessed by the town and the regional archives (the French *département* of Yvelines at Saint-Quentin), the plethora of newspaper articles that cover the Rambouillet Lily-of-the-Valley Festival, the generosity of all those interviewed and the information from conversations during my active participation in a part of the float-making, 'practice rather than preach' is an essential aspect of the activity. All the float-makers, some more obviously dedicated than others, express the communally recognized value of their work by doing it, not by speaking about it, whether they are citizens from birth or first- and second-generation immigrants. Likewise, it is casual comments – such as those about the traumatic first day at school – that open the window onto this vast topic of the many paths available for newcomers to take on the way to integration. One of them is to commit to being highly active in association work in a town through participation in many leisure activities and, in the case of the town's emblematic festival, standing among the 'makers' of the festival highlight, the parade floats that escort and even bear the Queen and her Dauphines to the culmination of the event at the town castle.

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Pakalnučių festivalis Rambujė (Prancūzija) kaip imigrantų integracijos būdas: jų meistriškumas ir socialinis pripažinimas

Cozette Griffin-Kremer

Summary

Dalyvavimas miesto festivaliuose yra vienas iš būdų Prancūzijoje sėkmingai integruoti naujai atvykusius imigrantus į visuomenę. Straipsnyje pasirinktas su gegužės mėnesį vykstančia švente susijusios veiklos pavyzdys, kuris pateikiamas platesniame prancūzų tradicinio prisirišimo prie pakalnučių (*Convoallaria majalis*) kontekste. Daugelyje Prancūzijos vietų gyvuoja paprotys jas dovanoti, ypač per Gegužės pirmosios šventę ar maždaug tuo metu. Dabartinę papročio

formą puikiai patvirtina devynioliktojo amžiaus antrosios pusės šaltiniai, nors pati šventė tik 1947 m. tapo nedarbo diena. Paprastai šis paprotys grindžiamas tuo, kad jis atneša sėkmę ir laimę, o Gegužės pirmosios šventė yra vienintelė metų diena, kai žmonėms leidžiama viešai prekiauti gatvėse. Kai kurie jų atsiveža tam tikrų regioninių produktų, kad jų su draugais ir šeima priskintos gėlės būtų dar patrauklesnės, bet daugiausia tuo užsiima jas auginantys komerciniai tikslais. Dėl didžiulio gėlių poreikio gėlių augintojų produkcija aplink Nanto miestą sudaro apie 80 procentų pardavimų, vien šiame krašte įdarbinta apie 6 000 laikinų darbuotojų tam, kad nuskintų ir paruoštų apie 60 milijonų šakelių. Remiantis naujausiais turimais duomenimis, 2014 m. komercinė nauda buvo apie 26,5 milijonai eurų.

Įtemptai ruošiantis pardavinėti gėles, priimami įvairūs darbuotojai, galintys tuo užsiimti dvi karštligiškas savaites iki šventės. Įdarbinami ne tik pensininkai ir studentai, bet ir daugiau ar mažiau neseniai atvykę imigrantai. Dažnai pabrėžiama, kokie jie būna naudingi tais laikotarpiais, kai susiklosto labai didelė darbuotojų paklausa. Prancūzijoje, kaip ir visoje Europoje, labai aktuali naujai atvykusiųjų veiksmingo integravimo problema. Žiniasklaidoje rodomas specialus susirūpinimas atvykusiųjų integravimu paskatino 2015 m. Prancūzijos Senato pirmininką parengti Prancūzijos prezidentui skirtą pranešimą. Prancūzija turi permainingą imigracijos istoriją, kuri prasidėjo XIX a. ir tęsiasi iki šių dienų, bet tipiškas europietiškos imigracijos pavyzdys yra portugalų bendruomenė. Ji turi daug pranašumų patvirtindama savo gebėjimą prisitaikyti Prancūzijoje. O priešingas pavyzdys yra bengalų imigrantai, kurie dažniausiai savęs nedeklaruoja, bet taip pat būna įtraukiami į darbą, susijusį su gėlėmis. Šiuo metu neatrodo, kad jų veikla daro tokį patį poveikį kaip portugalų, kurie Rambujė mieste yra tapę visiškai savi.

Rambujė yra garsus tuo, kad išlaikė „tradicinį“ *Pakalnučių* festivalį, kurį sudaro savaitgalio smagios mugės, muzikiniai renginiai, fejerverkai, viešas pobūvis parke ir papuoštų transporto priemonių paradas. Atliktame tyrime šiuo paradu itin domimasi, nes jame aktyviai dalyvauja dvi portugalų grupės. Be to, viena jų išmoko padaryti gėlėmis papuoštas transporto priemones iš tradiciją nuo festivalio įkūrimo 1906 m. išlaikiusių vyresniųjų. Paskutiniaisiais metais miesto renginio organizacinis komitetas paprašė minėtų darbų kūrėjus įgyvendinti tam tikrą temą. 2015 m. renginio tema buvo „animaciniai filmai“. Portugalų imigrantų „Festivalio draugų“ komanda pasirinko Skūbį Dū (*Scooby Doo*) ir Paslaptinę mašinę, o savo kūriniui papuošti panaudojo nuo 30 000 iki 40 000 augalų bei daugybę technikos. Toks jų darbas išsiskyrė iš visų kitų dalyvių kūrinių. Dėl šių dalyvių atsidavimo paskutiniaisiais metais festivalis tapo populiariesnis ir patrauklesnis vyresniajai kartai. Daugelis šių žmonių prisimena senų laikų įvykius, todėl iš jų sulauktas komplimentas apie kūrybiškumo ir meistriškumo lygį

vertinamas. Kaip pavyzdys pasirinkta portugalų komanda surado savo kelią, kaip sėkmingai integruotis, ypač atsiduodama tam, ką dauguma žmonių mieste laiko „tradicija“. Šis žodis sukelia atgarsį, ypač prancūzų ausyse, į „tradiciją“ daug lengviau įsitraukti, nei ją idėjiškai palaikyti. Tai vienas iš būdų, parodančių portugalų bendruomenės veiksmingą integravimąsi į Prancūzijos visuomenę.

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