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Essay # 3

Carnival

Most vacations relate to religious, historical or other national events. Some of them go back so far in time that we lost their origins. Few cities in France still celebrate an ancient feast that is more than one thousand years old. This festivity, called Carnival, comes from the depths of the Middle Ages. This tradition is so strong anchored in the habit of some urban areas that it attracts people from other regions to take part in it. The signification of Carnival has neither changed nor evolved throughout centuries. In the city where I come from, festivities last 3 days during Whitsun at the end of May. We will see that this feast is full of symbols and has not lost its message despite the evolution of our western society.

In Europe, the Middle Ages society was dramatically different from ours. Everything was more rigid than nowadays. People were filed in three categories, the nobility which possessed real-estates, the clergy which represented the power of the Roman Catholic Church and the Third Estate which gave obedience to the two superior categories. A big majority of farmers, craftsmen

and other professions composed the Third Estate. Legacy was the basis of the system. A son of a farmer became a farmer, the first son of the Lord sat in his father's land and power. The Lord authorized farmers to cultivate his soil. In exchange, the farmer had to obey and pay him a part of its harvest and other labor for free (it was called a chore). This strong organized society did not give any place for personal fulfillment or freedom, and people should feel frustration and would ask for changes. It was not a dark age but another civilization based on other values and peculiar traditions.

Carnival gave to these people the opportunity to set themselves free some days per year. Throughout these days, the Lord was not the leader of his community and the power belongs to his people. They were able to have fun, criticize the Lord, the King, the Church and any other powerful men or institutions. It also tied up the relationship among the inhabitants.

All over the celebration, a chairman was chosen. He had the same power as the Lord but he acted with an ironic attitude. This character was named the buffoon. His role was to organize the new society for these three days and three nights.

The buffoon replaced all powers that governed the society. He wrote Bills and gave Justice which were enforced only for this period. At the time of Carnival, the buffoon gave a performance in a play in which he interpreted different characters and joked about all major events happened during the last year. He acted like any comics. Nowadays, he acts the same but he criticizes the mayor, the government and famous people. Carnival is also the feast where the population "change" their religion. At the Middle Ages, Clergy was extremely powerful (it always acted in the name of God), and its rituals were rigid. They compelled believers to follow these rules.

In order to replace the Clergy, every city built a giant which is a tall statue representing the inhabitants of a region or a community. The buffoon organized the celebration in the name of the giant so every person could “pray” for it and ask it a favor. Of course, the real Clergy gave its benediction to the giant and the priest transmitted his power to it. This means that the giant was not a new god but a new symbol of God represented with a new face and a new manner to pray it. Today, the giant is considered as the protector of the feast and has lost its religious characteristic. Its height is roughly 45 feet, it is dressed like a king and raised in front of the city hall or the church.

Above all, Carnival is the town festival. It is the time for a parade with brass bands, for plays, games and contests in a small fair. There is also an open market where we can buy some gastronomic foods and purchase crafted items. Shops participate by selling off their stocks. It is not only a feast for fun but also for bargains. The last night, after a party, fireworks are ignited in a light show.

All over this festivity, cafés and restaurants serve a unique dish: tripe with French fries. It is composed with calf and pork guts in a spicy and gelatinous sauce, cooked with carrots, tomatoes and herbs. It is a cheap and popular dish. Its smell and taste are strong but people just love it! In France, a phrase says if someone has “guts”, he is courageous. Guts are a symbol of inner force, a place where energy is stored. Therefore, this dish may be a fashion to find more strength and courage to go through everyday life’s issues.

We served another odd dish during Carnival. It is soup, but not a regular one. Anybody who wants to eat some soup must put an ingredient in an enormous cauldron. It can be vegetables (potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, celery, etc.), salt and pepper or any herbs. And a couple of hours

later, it is ready to be eaten. The meaning of this tradition is simple. Those who contribute in a development of this dish win the right to appreciate it. Building something great could be accomplished depending on the participation of a certain number of persons. It is a way to promote a collective behavior. The taste of this soup is not great, but here, the meaning is more important than the success of the dish. It is a food for thought!

Carnival has the same signification in every city. It means literally the feast of the flesh in contrast to religious and national ceremony which are more spiritually oriented. However, no city has the same fashion to celebrate it. I have describe the way it is organized in my city but, in other places, Carnival is not observed at the same date, does not last the same time (it can last one month in a city in the north of France) and does not follow the same tradition (in Venice, everybody disguises, so corporations disappear and everyone is at the same social level). It is strongly marked by the identity of the community that celebrates Carnival. That is why it makes this feast so unique.