

# South Louisiana: Unity and Diversity in a Folk Region by Nicholas R. Spitzer

The varied folk traditions of South Louisiana, from Cajun music and Creole zydeco to cooking of gumbo and building Lafitte skiffs, reflect the great diversity of the region's natural and cultural environments. To describe French southern Louisiana as a diverse "folk region," however, is difficult, for such areas are generally defined as culturally homogenous, with relatively stable populations.

To be sure, there are regional unifying features in South Louisiana: the French language (Cajun dialects and Creole), Catholicism (over 50%), festivals, folk foodways (gumbo, jambalaya, *boudin* sausage, *andouille*, etc.) and traditional material culture (Creole cottages and folk boats). Each of these features also has a great deal of regional variation and many are not strictly of French origin. For example, Creole, the Afro-French language of the plantation areas, is spoken largely in a sub-region west of the Atchafalaya Basin (see map), while Cajun French is spoken on the prairies. The latter dialect is decidedly nasal with flat vowels when compared to that spoken in the town of French Settlement east of the Mississippi or older New Orleans French, both of which sound a bit more Continental. Similarly, Catholicism varies from the grand tradition evoked by Cathedrals in Lafayette and New Orleans to folk practices such as shrimp fleet and cane field blessings, home altars, yard virgins, *traiteurs* (folk medicine treaters) and, among some black Catholics, *jurer* (Afro-French praise chanting).

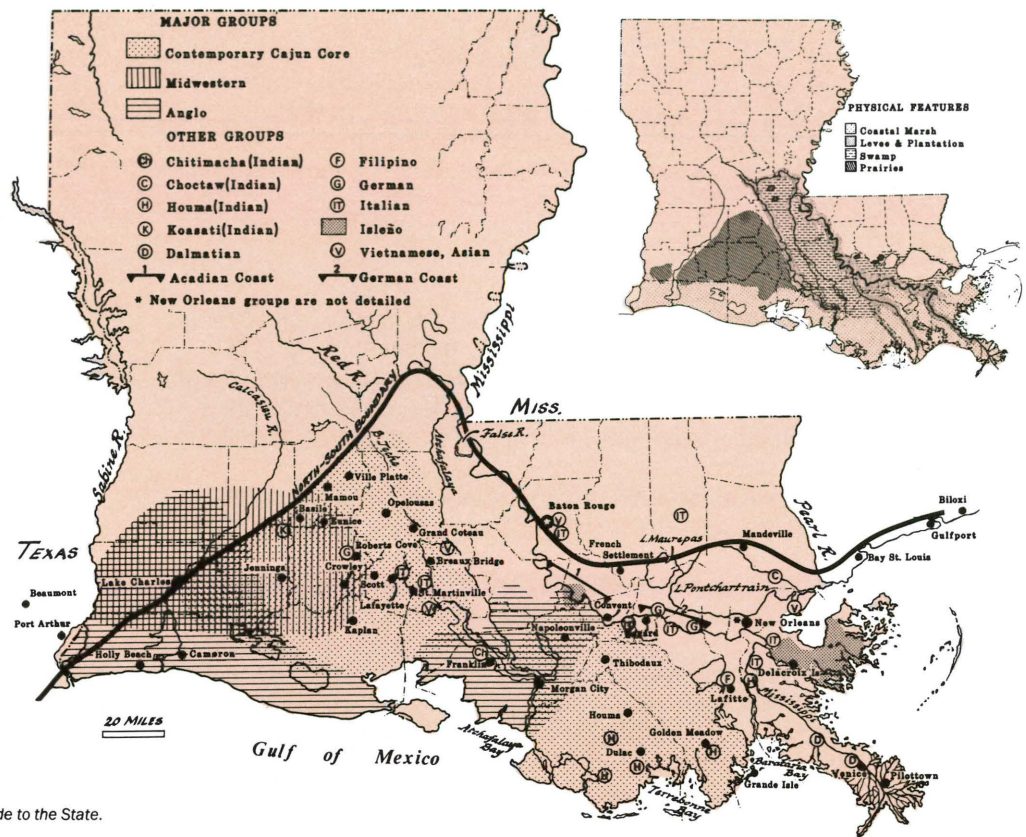
Festivals range from the large public Mardi Gras float parades of New Orleans, to back streets devoted to the Afro-Caribbean Black "Indians," as well as the rural country *courir de Mardi Gras*, where costumed clowns and rogues go house to house in search of chickens for a communal gumbo. There are also a burgeoning number of neo-festivals that celebrate crawfish, oysters, oil and ethnicity, courtesy of the local Cajun Jaycees or Bayou Lions Club.

Food, though universally well seasoned and a social focal point throughout French Louisiana, also varies widely. Gumbo on the prairies is usually made with chicken and sausage in a dark roux, while the gumbo of the lower coast is

Joseph Bébé Carrière, Creole violinist from Lawtell, Louisiana. Photo by Nicholas Spitzer.







Map of South Louisiana folk regions.  
 Ada L.K. Newton from *Louisiana Folklife: A Guide to the State*.  
 Data by Nicholas R. Spitzer.

likely to contain seafood. In New Orleans tomato transforms the dish into one the prairie dwellers would scarcely recognize as gumbo.

Folk housing in the form of Creole and Acadian cottages shows some continuity of type. Still, houses near the water tend to be built on stilts and of simpler construction, while the inland housing along the bayous and on the prairies may be more elaborate with *bousillage* (mud and moss) walls, half timbering, a second floor *garçonnière* and central chimneys.

Folk boats built in wood are particularly subject to environmental variation. The *pirogue*, originally an Indian boat found along the coast, is used wherever there is a veneer of moisture from prairie canal to lower coast *trainasse* (a tiny path cut for a *pirogue*). The Lafitte skiff tends to be a lower coast and offshore boat for small-scale shrimping. Despite their shallow drafts, Creole skiffs and *bateaux* have great stability when loaded, and are used in the flat water of inland swamp basins and slow bayous for crawfishing and catfishing.

This overall diversity of cultural forms in French Louisiana today is a product of nearly three hundred years of settlement. The earliest colonists tended to occupy the high ground along the Mississippi and the major bayous. It was here that French and German concessions (large land grants), *habitations* (smaller grants) and later, plantations for indigo and tobacco, were developed as part of the larger French West Indian plantation sphere of the 18th century. In the 19th century sugar became the dominant crop among the French and especially the newer American plantations.

In addition to plantation society were the Acadians – *petit habitants*, exiled from Nova Scotia who arrived after 1765 to become small farmers and fishermen. Though early Cajuns settled levee lands along the “Acadian Coast” of the Mississippi, the social economy of plantation growth forced many of these smaller farmers to move into less desirable areas along the lower coast and into the swamp basins. Many Cajuns had already settled successfully along upper Bayou Teche to the west, and some of these people spilled out onto the prairies. Today the vast “sea” of rice and soybean growing prairies as well as the shrimp, oyster and oil areas of Bayou Lafourche form the core of modern Cajun life (see map).



The planter/mercantilists of direct French descent, German colonists, Spaniards during the Spanish regime (1768-1803), *Isleños* from the Canary Islands, the Acadians, Black slaves and native Indian tribes (Bayou Goula, Houma, Choctaw) comprised most of the eighteenth century South Louisiana population. American planters and some yeomen farmers from the Upland South arrived in the early nineteenth century. Later ethnic immigrants from Europe also added to this mix. These included Germans, Italians and Dalmatians. The Italians replaced Black slaves in the 1870s as sugar workers, while the Dalmatians from Yugoslavia brought the knowledge and technology of fishing for oysters to the lower coast around the turn of the century. In addition to German immigrants who settled in New Orleans, many midwestern German farmers moved to the prairies of southwest Louisiana in the 1880s.

Certainly the major non-European influence in this colonial and immigrant “gumbo” of cultures was from Africa and the West Indies. Louisiana planters brought 28,000 slaves to cut cane and make sugar from Senegal, Dahomey and the Congo through the French West Indian trade of the eighteenth century. The early colonists, primarily French-Spanish in origin, referred to themselves as “Creoles” (from the Portuguese *Crioulo*: native to a region), meaning that they were descendants of Europeans born in the New World. When the European Creoles mixed with slave populations in the West Indies and Louisiana, they produced an intermediate group called the *gens libres de couleur* (Creoles of Color) – the offspring of planters and slaves. Such light-skinned, often very European people, were likely to be freed and given land, unlike those in the Anglo-dominated South. After the Haitian uprisings in what had been the French sugar colony of St. Domingue, Caribbean refugees flooded New Orleans from 1804 to 1810. These included planters, Creoles of Color and French slaves. This influx added a strong West Indian flavor to South Louisiana culture. The French slaves and lighter free people began to use the term “Creole” to distinguish themselves from the American Blacks and the Anglo planters as well as from the Cajun peasantry encountered when they migrated onto the prairies in search of land.

Given this complex history of contact and change, “Creole” in Louisiana today can mean diametric opposites as well as a broad range in between, depending upon who is talking to whom and about what. In the plantation areas and around New Orleans, a Creole still tends to be thought of as a descendant from the old European colonial families. However, along Bayou Teche and out onto the prairies, the Creoles usually are those who were historically free people that now share Cajun culture to some degree. These “Black Creoles” often overlap culturally with Cajuns in their speech style, religion and, to a lesser extent, music, but they are still socially distinct. As a result the term “Black Cajun” is usually not an acceptable one to Cajuns or such Creoles.

Further complicating matters is the Creole language, which is the Afro-French speech found in St. Martin, St. Landry, Point Coupee and Iberia Parishes where the strongest French plantation economy was retained. French Creole, spoken by people of all colors, *mo couri* means “I go;” *mo té couri* is “I went;” *mo té pé couri* is “I was going” and so on. This language is remarkably similar to Haitian Creole and that spoken in other places of Afro-French contact in Africa, the West Indies and the Indian Ocean. Cajun French on the other hand is a mingling of seventeenth century Acadian French and maritime French, with strong influences from English as well as some Indian, Spanish, German and African languages. Cajun French and Creole speakers alike in Louisiana will tell you, “The French, it changes every thirty miles.” Most people who speak one type of Louisiana French can understand the other forms; however, foreign French speaking visitors are not always as able to comprehend local dialects.

A great irony in the persistence of French folk culture in South Louisiana is that it is among Black Creoles and French-speaking Houma Indians (located in the lower coastal parishes of Terrebone and Lafourche) that one often finds the strongest retention of French traditions in such cultural aspects as language, religion, and foodways. Although more upwardly mobile Cajuns tended in the



Delton Broussard and the Lawtell Playboys play zydeco at Slim's Y-Ki-Ki, a Creole dance hall. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer.





A Cajun fisherman with a *pirogue*, a traditional boat type from French Louisiana. Photo by Robert Yellin for the Smithsonian Institution.

Nick Spitzer, the Director of the Louisiana Folklife Program, has done fieldwork in southern Louisiana since 1974, including research for the Smithsonian Institution in 1975 and 1978. He has produced several records on Louisiana folk music and has just completed a film on zydeco.

#### Suggested reading

Comeaux, Malcolm. *Atchafalaya Swamp Life: Settlement and Folk Occupations*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Museum of Geoscience, 1972.

Conrad, Glenn R., ed. *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*. Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwest-ern Louisiana, 1978.

Cooke, John, ed. *New Orleans Ethnic Cul-tures*. New Orleans: The Committee on Eth-nicity, 1978.

Spitzer, Nicholas R., ed. *Mississippi Delta Ethnographic Overview*. New Orleans: Jean Lafitte National Park, 1979.

#### Suggested recordings

*Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians*. Arhoolie 5009 and 5015.

*J'étais au bal: Music from French Louisiana*. Swallow 6020.

*Louisiana Cajun Music*. Old-Timey Records 108, 109, 110, 111, 114, 124, and 125.

*Zodico: Louisiana Creole Music*. Rounder Record 6009.

#### Suggested films

*Dedans le Sud de la Louisiane*, by Jean Pierre Bruneau. 60 min. color sound. Bayou Films, Rt. 3, P.O. Box 614, Cut Off, Louisiana 70345.

*Le son des Cajuns*, by André Gladu. Four 30 min. color video programs. Canadian Broad-casting Corp., 245 Park Ave., New York, New York 10022.

*Zydeco: Creole Music and Culture in Rural Louisiana*, by Nicholas R. Spitzer and Stephen Duplantier (1983). 58 min. color sound. Bayou Films, Rt. 3, P.O. Box 614, Cut Off, Louisiana 70345.

nineteenth century to assimilate German, Spanish, English and other popula-tions that they were in contact with, they have over the last fifty years been increasingly affected by Anglo-American culture. Thus today in urban areas and on the prairies one hears less French spoken, and more country and western music performed – a part of a general cowboy Texan influence. Much of this acculturation was due to the introduction of hard-topped roads, English lan-guage textbooks and the media, the involvement of Cajuns in military service during World War II, and the tremendous influx of oil industry service popula-tions in the twentieth century. Less obvious, but still significant, Anglo and German cultural impacts on Louisiana Cajuns reach into the nineteenth century. German midwesterners and Anglos from Texas and elsewhere came to the prairies after the Civil War. They settled in the pattern of the midwestern farmstead, bringing with them its two story I-houses and wheat farming tech-nology that was converted to use for growing rice. The Germans may also have introduced the button accordion to the region, now the mainstay of Cajun music. The contact with Texans grew later during the oil industry expansion, when Cajuns migrated to Texas border towns, like Port Arthur and Beaumont, to work in the refineries. Texans likewise came to Morgan City, Houma, Lafayette and Lake Charles in oil related jobs and brought with them their speech style, Western swing music and Anglo world view.

If Anglo culture in the region has affected Cajuns, in the twentieth century, Black American culture has had a similar impact on Creoles. For example, they have tended increasingly to listen to soul music rather than their own zydeco style of French music. Until recently anything that seemed Creole or French was considered *passé* or “country” by Black Creoles who found themselves excluded from Cajun society, and somewhat as well from Black American society. Lately, however, a return to Afro-French Creole identity has paralleled the general renaissance of Louisiana French culture. Louisiana Creoles are increasingly interested in their unique mix of African and European traditions. This is evidenced in the impressive resurgence of zydeco music (and dance halls) which reflects their own diverse history in its mingling of Afro-Caribbean rhythms, Cajun tunes and Black American blues tonalities. Creoles recognize zydeco as their own music, but also are aware of its close relation to Cajun style. Zydeco symbolizes in part their participation in the broader culture of French Louisiana.

Cajun music has also come to represent the survival and re-awakening of Cajun culture, thanks in part to the efforts of the Smithsonian Institution and its fieldworkers in the 1960s and 1970s. Cajun culture and society, which at one time absorbed the Creole planters, Spaniards, Germans, Anglos and others, still sets the cultural tone for the region as a whole. Cajun ethnicity, now symbolized by the once derided crawfish, has expanded a region-wide consciousness to the point that newcomers in the oil industry seem to accept at least the French music traditions and foodways, and claim their “Cajun-ness” in a short time.

In part, the regionalization of Cajun culture is a tribute to its persistence over the years. Further, some underlying unities provide a contrast to the region's diversity and make the label “Cajun” a commodious one. For example, material culture activities, like boat making and carving duck decoys, are shared to varying degrees by Creoles, Anglos, *Isleños*, Slavonians and Italians throughout the area. Many members of these distinct groups speak at least contact Cajun French. Co-existence in the regional environment also permits shared experiences in hunting and fishing. Thus, it is that one *Isleño* word for duck is taken from the French *canard*, or the Cajun word for raccoon (*chaouis*) is taken from Indian usage. But the most basic unifying feature of nearly all the ethnic groups who affiliate with this Mediterranean-African derived folk region, is the presence of and participation in the Catholic Church, with its vaulted above-ground tombs, looming cathedrals, and ritual/festival complex. All Saints and Mardi Gras celebrations in South Louisi-ana and related areas of the Gulf Coast are unique in American Catholicism. The complexity of the history, ethnicity and varied traditions on the same cultural landscape promise a continued balance of unity and diversity in French southern Louisiana.