

The Creole State: An Introduction to Louisiana Traditional Culture by Nicholas R. Spitzer

Nicholas Spitzer has directed the Louisiana Folklife Program in the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism since 1978. He has carried out ethnographic research for the Jean Lafitte National Park, directed a film on zydeco music, recorded Louisiana traditional music extensively and helped to found the Louisiana Folklife Festival and Baton Rouge Blues Festival. Spitzer is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Texas.

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To outsiders Louisiana conjures up a myriad of images: lazy bayous and political cockfights; alligator-laden swamps and streets choked with Mardi Gras revelers; Cajun waltzes and voodoo dolls; decaying log “dogtrot” houses and flood-rusted mobile homes. Beneath the stereotypes is a state steeped in a variety of traditions grappling with the attractions of the cultural and economic mainstream. Louisiana’s citizens are aware of the complex mixture of tradition and change in a state that is as much Sunbelt-suburban as it is pioneer, frontier, plantation, farmstead, fisherman’s camp or New Orleans neighborhood.

The richness of Louisiana folk traditions, from old-time jazz and Cajun music to Creole food and north Louisiana craftsmen, is increasingly recognized as valuable to the economic and cultural future of the state. Development that brings with it environmental problems and adverse effects to the traditional communities and landscape is now often questioned.

The Louisiana program at the Festival of American Folklife presents the best of traditional life to show how folk cultural resources can help sustain the state in the future if properly encouraged. Previous festivals have shown Louisiana folk culture primarily in terms of Cajun and New Orleans musical traditions. This year’s Festival attempts to correct this imbalance by presenting the traditions of the entire state: south Louisiana, north Louisiana, the Florida Parishes and New Orleans (see map).

Predominantly Catholic and French, south Louisiana has been described as “South of the South.” The region’s Mediterranean-African-Caribbean roots and plantation past make it and New Orleans as much akin to societies in the Spanish and French West Indies as the American South. Rural south Louisiana is dominated by the Acadians, or Cajuns, who came from what is now Nova Scotia as *petit habitants* (small farmers) in the late 18th century. Over time, the Cajuns have absorbed and been affected by a wide array of cultures in the area: Spanish, German, Italian, Anglo, Native American, Afro-French, Afro-American and Slavonian. South Louisiana’s distinctive foodways (gumbo, jambalaya, crawfish *étouffée*), musics (Cajun and zydeco), material culture (Creole cottages, shotgun houses, *pirogues* and *bateaux*), ritual and festival practices (folk Catholicism, home altars, *traiteurs*, Mardi Gras) and languages (Cajun and Creole French, Spanish, Dalmatian and Indian languages) reflect a diversity of culture unified in one region.

Some south Louisiana groups are largely independent of Cajun cultural influences. For example, Spanish-speaking Isleños of St. Bernard Parish descend from Canary Islanders who arrived contemporaneously with Acadians. Isleños pride themselves as great duck



hunters, fishermen and trappers, and they continue to cook the Spanish dish *caldo* and sing complex story songs, called *decimas*, about the exploits of the cruel knight from the Middle Ages, or the lazy fisherman in today's coastal town of Delacroix.

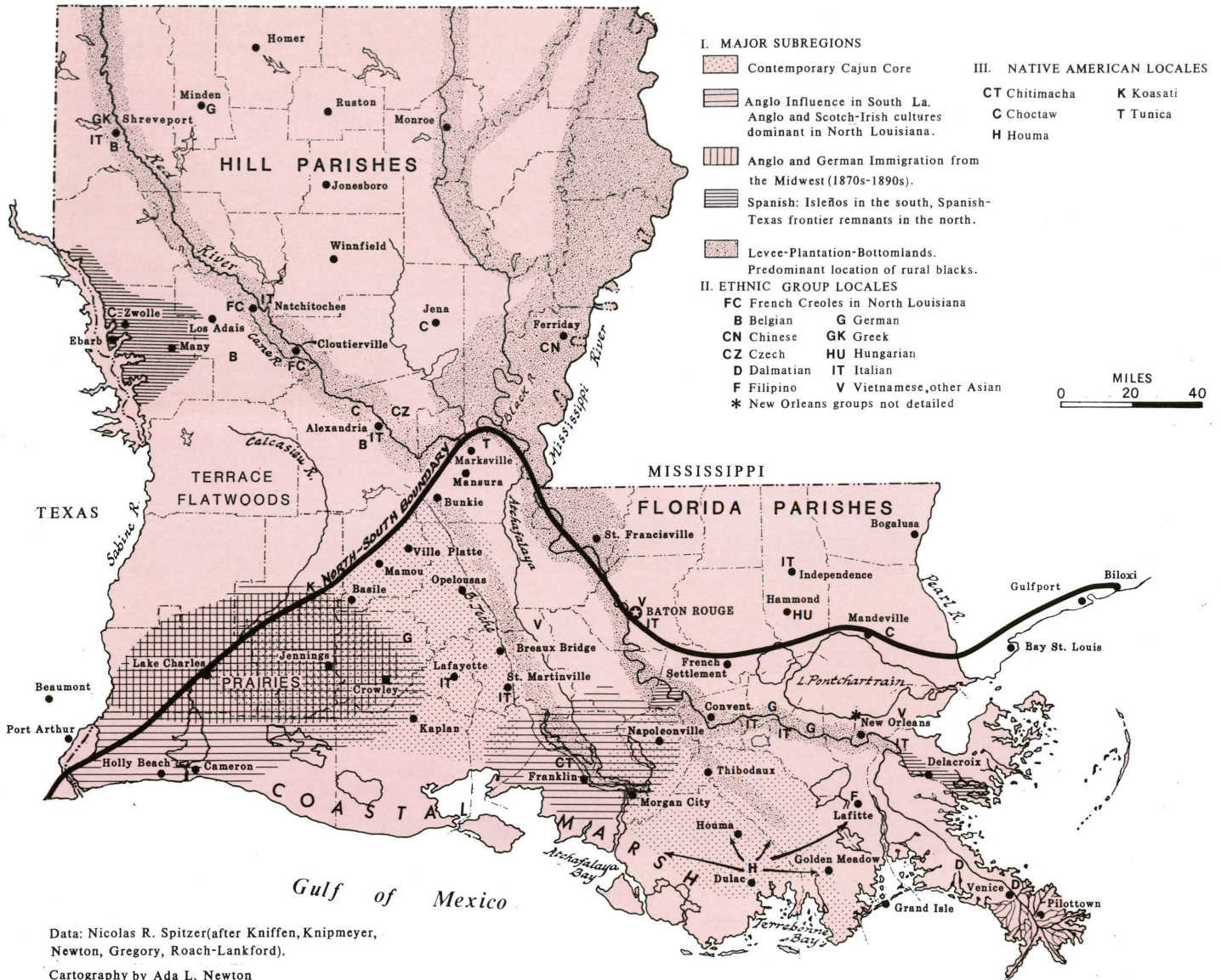
Indian people, who were in the region before all others, have made their contributions to wooden boat styles, folk medicine and other traditions now associated with south Louisiana as a whole. While the Houma tribe conserves aspects of a 19th-century French folk culture; the Coshatta and Chitimacha have maintained greater separation from Cajun culture as evidenced by their native language retention and basketry traditions.

Nineteenth and 20th-century immigration to south Louisiana included fishermen from the Dalmation coast of Yugoslavia, who settled in coastal Plaquemines Parish, where they introduced the oyster industry. Italians arrived in the same era, many as sharecroppers on post-Civil War plantations. Since then they have developed truck farming and rural food distribution in Louisiana while playing an active role in the urban cultures of New Orleans and elsewhere.

The mingling of all these peoples in south Louisiana has been likened to the ingredients in gumbo — named after an African word for okra — which contribute to a total taste while retaining distinctive ethnic “flavors.” Less metaphorically, the terms “Creole” and “creolization” have been used to describe the region’s cultural blending

“Le grand chemin”, sacred ground in south Louisiana. A roadside station of the cross marks the entrance to the Pine-Oak Alley near St. Martinville. The Alley is a huge planting of trees in the form of a cross used for weddings in the 19th century. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program.

LOUISIANA FOLK REGIONS



and distinctiveness. Creole, from the Portuguese *crioulo* (“native to a region”), originally referred to the French/Spanish colonial population in south Louisiana and the Caribbean region. Prior to the Civil War, the word also came to refer to the *gens de couleur libre* (free men of color) of Afro-European descent. Today the term has a variety of meanings but usually refers to people of mixed African, French, Spanish and Indian heritage in southwest Louisiana. However, in southeast Louisiana plantation regions and in New Orleans, Creole is sometimes associated with exclusively European ancestry and culture. Linguists apply the term to the Afro-French language called Creole found in the French West Indies as well as in French plantation areas of south Louisiana.

The most concentrated creolization of cultures has occurred in New Orleans, which is simultaneously a southern city near the mouth of the Mississippi and a Gulf Coast/Caribbean port. “The Crescent City” was the nation’s largest port prior to the Civil War, when cotton was floated on barges and boats downriver and beyond to British and American fabric mills. The mingling of people in New Orleans has

led to a city of many accents, the most pronounced of which is called the “Yat” accent of the Irish Channel section and the city’s Ninth Ward, as in the expression “Where y’at?” The intense Afro-European contact that shaped New Orleans culture led to the birth of jazz, as former slaves merged Afro-Caribbean rhythms and street performance with European instrumental traditions of the cotillion, the parlor and the military parade. New Orleans cuisine and architecture also reflect a merging of aesthetics, as highly seasoned soul food and fancy Creole sauces are paralleled by elevated West Indian-style shotgun houses elaborately trimmed and French cottages with Norman rooflines and shaded sun porches. Native New Orleanians, though dominantly Catholic, are ethnically diverse. Yet a city-wide identity based on this diversity and the area’s difference from other urban centers in America persists. To most visitors the sights, sounds and smells of New Orleans neighborhoods as well as the annual Mardi Gras speak more of Port-au-Prince and Lima than of Atlanta and Nashville. The preponderance of saints days festivities, carnival and other parades reinforces this impression.

In contrast to south Louisiana and New Orleans, Protestant north Louisiana is historically and culturally part of the upland and riverine American South. North Louisiana’s mainly rural folk landscape was shaped by contact between American Indian and Anglo- and Afro-Americans, in pioneer, plantation, sharecropping and farmstead settings among the river bottomlands, piney woods and hills of the region. In this relatively isolated and more Anglo-influenced part of the state, there is less overlapping of cultural groups than in south Louisiana, and contrasts within the region are more prominent (see map). Creoles of Color are found in the Cane River area below Natchitoches, where some of them in fact once owned plantations. Spanish-speakers of Choctaw-Anglo descent live in the old “no man’s land” to the west of Natchitoches on the Texas/Louisiana border. Some live in log houses, cook tamales and practice a folk Catholicism in contrast to their Anglo Baptist neighbors. There are also Italians, Hungarians, Czechs and Greeks throughout north Louisiana and its adjacent Florida Parishes. The overall Anglo tone of the region has been likened to a quilt: like the folk landscape of north Louisiana, the



Marie Billiot Dean, a Houma Indian basket weaver from Dulac, Terrebonne Parish, with palmetto drying in her backyard. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program.



Dancing in a black Creole club in Cecilia, Louisiana, to the zydeco music of Claude Duffy and his Fire Band. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program.

Crawfisherman Hally Barras of Catahoula checks his traps. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program.

Suggested reading

Conrad, Glen, ed. *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*. Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana Press, 1978.

Cooke, John, ed. *Perspectives on Ethnicity in New Orleans, 1978-1983*. New Orleans: The Committee on Ethnicity in New Orleans.

Roach-Lankford, Susan. *Gifts From the Hills: North Central Louisiana Folklife Traditions*. Ruston: Louisiana Tech Art Gallery, 1984.

Spitzer, Nicholas R., ed. *Louisiana Folklife: A Guide to the State*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana Folklife Program, 1985.

Suggested recordings

Louisiana Cajun Music, vols. 1 through 8 (OldTimey Records).

Louisiana Folklife Recording Series, LP's 001-004 (Louisiana Folklife Program).

Music of New Orleans, vols. 1 through 5 (Folkways).

Zodico: *Louisiana Creole Music* (Rounder Records 6009).

Suggested films

Always For Pleasure, by Les Blank. 58 min. color sound. Flower Films, El Cerrito, California.

Dedans la Sud de la Louisiane, by Jean-Pierre Bruneau. 60 min. color sound. Bayou Films, Cut Off, Louisiana.

Gumbo: The Mysteries of Cajun and Creole Cooking, by Steve Duplantier and Marc Porter. Center for Gulf South History and Culture, Abita Springs, Louisiana.

Something Nobody Else Has: The Story of Turtle Trapping in Louisiana, by Lee Aber and Rick Fuharin. 29 min. color video. Hawksbill Productions, Shreveport, Louisiana.

Zydeco: Creole Music and Culture in Rural Louisiana, by Nick Spitzer and Steve Duplantier. 56 min. color video. Center for Gulf South History and Culture, Abita Springs, Louisiana.



region is clearly patterned but composed of many separate colored and textured pieces.

With the exception of the Natchitoches/Cane River area, the term Creole has not been used historically to describe north Louisiana's culture. However, because this part of Louisiana is tied economically and politically to the French southern part of the state, an emerging creolization between these regions has been on-going since statehood in 1812. The mixing is at its strongest in the cultural border areas, where north Louisianians add gumbo to their foodways and Cajuns sing country music in French.

Perhaps because Louisiana as a whole still speaks with diverse and contrasting voices of tradition, the state is just beginning to recognize and support programs that conserve and promote its folk cultures. This year the state legislature in Baton Rouge is considering first time funding for the Louisiana Folklife Program. The efforts of the Smithsonian Institution and other groups over the last 20 years through fieldwork, sound recordings and festival presentation have done much to assist the conservation and renaissance of Cajun culture. Those presenting New Orleans culture have long emphasized tourist promotion but with less attention to the conservation of what some have called "the cultural wetlands" of the city, that is, its root traditions and communities. The cultures of the Florida Parishes and north Louisiana have remained virtually ignored until quite recently. It is hoped that the celebratory mingling of *all* the regions and cultures of Louisiana at the 1985 Festival of American Folklife will bring them their due applause that can be heard back home.