The "Cajun" Subculture: Microtrends for the 1990's*

JERRY SAVELLS**

ABSTRACT

The Cajun population of Louisiana exceeds a half million today. This ethnographic research is an effort to compare and document select forms of acculturation in 13 Cajun communities in southern Louisiana. Approximately 60 individuals were interviewed—representing a cross section of occupations, social classes, educational backgrounds, and age groupings. Interviews were unstructured—focusing more on "qualitative" than "quantitative" changes. All interviews were completed and archival data collected between spring 1991 and summer 1992.

The Cajuns in this study are not opposed to modernity, but they have legitimate concerns in wanting to preserve and protect their cultural "roots," i.e., language, folkways, values, norms, and lifestyle. Special emphasis has been given to the challenges facing the contemporary Cajun family in its struggle to maintain a delicate balance between tradition and economic survival.

Introduction

As a researcher with a professional interest in ethnography and how families and subcultures cope with the forces of social change, in the spring of 1991, I decided to return to southern Louisiana for an update on some of my previous research completed over 20 years ago.


According to Barry Jean Ancelet, et al., (1991 xvi), the majority of Cajuns began to show some evidence of significant acculturation (i.e., Americanization) at the turn of this century—or shortly thereafter. Several factors influenced this experience: (1) the nationalistic fervor of the early 1900's followed by World War I—in which many Cajuns were drafted for military service; (2) the discovery of oil in 1901 in Jennings, Louisiana—with the concomitant surge in oil exploration between World War I and World War II; (3) the mandatory education act of 1916—which made English the only language allowed in the classroom; (4) the building of a modern highway system across the bayous and parishes of Louisiana—to connect even remote villages to the urban areas of New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Lafayette; (5) the development of radio and later television; (6) the humbling experiences of the Great Depression with

* A paper presented at the Popular Culture Association in the South Annual Meetings, Augusta, Georgia, October 1992. This paper may not be duplicated without the written permission of the author. All copyright privileges are reserved. This research has been supported by the Wright State University College of Liberal Arts and Research Council in 1991-1992. The author wishes to express his gratitude for this support.
** Department of Sociology, Wright State University, Dayton, OH 45435, U.S.A.
some migration in search of jobs; and, (7) the advent of the re-discovery of "Cajun Land" (with tour buses and millions of tourists) in the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Traditional Cajun music, Cajun cuisine, Cajun French, and Cajun folklore are now "chic"—or, as some would say, "hot." Without a doubt, the subculture of the Cajuns of south Louisiana is experiencing enormous pressures in the 1990's (often of an economic bent) to accept further acculturation in the name of "progress"—often interpreted as "profit" by many outsiders (non-Cajuns) who stand to gain financially from these changes. It may put "bread on the table" for another generation, but at what cost? Ethnographers, historians, sociologists, linguists, and anthropologists have fertile soil here for further research.

Methodology


The focus of this effort will be to assess the impact of modernity upon the quality of Cajun life in some select communities I had previously studied, plus some additional communities not previously studied. During the summer of 1991, I visited the Louisiana Cajun communities of Lockport, LaRose, Cut Off, Galliano, Golden Meadow (all along Bayou Lafourche), Raceland, Thibodeaux, Houma, Morgan City, New Iberia, St. Martinville, Breaux Bridge, and Lafayette. I interviewed select members of the Cajun population in some of these communities, visited the local libraries for information, collected data from the National Park Service for the Jean Lafitte National Park, visited the Louisiana Historical museum in New Orleans, and reviewed the material available at the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (in Lafayette) and Tulane University (in New Orleans). I also interviewed some Cajun community leaders, two postmasters, a cultural anthropologist, and the director(s) of several local museums and centers for economic development and tourism. Although the interviewing was informal, extensive note-taking and documentation was possible.

The number of respondents was approximately 60 individuals—representing a diversity of occupations, social classes, educational pursuits, and ages.

In using the research of Pollack (1981) as a reference point for this study, "change has been operationally defined as any measurable shift in behavioral practices or the adoption of new ideas and/or attitudes during the past half century." Select variables that describe various aspects of modernization have been identified, i.e., presence or absence of bilingualism, varying educational pursuits, resistance to the "mass media," the desire for material goods, career aspirations for the young, encouragement for social mobility, and the degree of anonymity (from) or immersion (in) the mass culture.