IDENTITY CRISIS

THE REGIONAL CREOLE COMMUNITY
MUST DEAL WITH ITS OWN DIVERSE PAST
AND MODERN CULTURAL CONFUSION.

BY KATRINNA HUGGS

While dining one day this summer with a friend from Guinea, Africa, at a roadside restaurant in Lafayette, my friend and I experienced an ethnic tragi-comedy that made our lunch. Into the restaurant walked a group of college-age Creoles. One of them was wearing a necklace with a large, homemade-looking pendant shaped in the continent of Africa. Upon seeing the necklace, my African friend exclaimed, in almost an outburst of laughter, "La Africaine est l'inverse!" ("Her Africa is shaped backwards!").

The incident was still funny days later... "L'Afrique a l'inverse." But what that Creole woman's pendant represents is a very serious situation among Creoles in this part of Louisiana. The small but culturally rich ethnic black population, confused and unaware of its background, is in danger of losing its heritage, much as the Cajun culture was before its revival these past decades.

One example is the degree to which the Creole language has disintegrated. Creole is an oral language and references that document the language, like a Creole dictionary, don't exist. And today, because so much of the original Creole language has been lost due to merging with Cajun, it would take a linguist to decipher the subtle differences between the two languages, or perhaps now, patois.

But the state of the Creole culture isn't hopeless. The very fact that the young woman in the restaurant was wearing a necklace with the African continent—even if it was designed backwards—represents a challenging phenomenon that has been occurring within the Creole community in the last several years: a drive to rediscover Creole roots, Creole identity and most importantly, Creole pride.

The best example of this Creole renaissance is the local organization C.R.E.O.L.E. The acronym stands for "Cultural, Resourceful, Educational Opportunities Towards Linguistic Enrichment." In a nutshell, the acronym amounts to first identifying what it means to be a Creole from Acadia, and then standing up and being counted as one.

When I was brought up I thought anyone who spoke French and was black was a Creole," says CREOLE's vice president, Herbert Wiltz. "But it wasn't until much later that I realized that a Creole was a mixture of French, Spanish and other cultures. When Wiltz, a French teacher, visited Guadeloupe, one of his nicest experiences was being a place where black Creole French was spoken.

What we're trying to say to Creoles is that French is a Creole French] is acceptable and you should speak it," says Wiltz. "Yes, it's true that you will get people coming out of it. It was the same in Guadeloupe. They're beginning to teach Creole in schools now. At one time it was almost lost because it wasn't Parisian French.

Geneva Phillips, a CREOLE member who visited Guadeloupe this summer, sums up the problem: "The Creole, this in this area hasn't reached that pride yet that the Cajuns have—to speak Creole French."

Before I die I'd like to see black Creole culture and Creole language promoted," says Wilbert Guillory, 57, president of the populist Zydeco Festival in Plaisance, "and not as deep as Cajun has been promoted, because I think Creole is a black group."

Guillory and the city of Opelousas organized the non-profit Zydeco Festival in 1982 to help save zydeco music that wasn't getting any promotion or media attention, according to Guillory, "We need to do more things like we were able to do through hard work and luck, to pick zydeco music up," he says. "I mean really get it back through the Zydeco Festival."

Although Guillory has been an advocate of resurrecting the Creole culture since 1982, he became even more impressed about his cause after attending a convention in New Market, Tenn., in 1986. At the convention, various ethnic groups in the United States searching for their identities and cultures were represented. After a confrontation with Guillory, some of the out-of-state convention wanted him to "give in" and say he was a Cajun. "Then I realized people were trying to force Creoles to be black Cajuns, and we're not," he says. Part of the confusion about the differences between what is Cajun and what is Creole is due to media hype, such as the portrayal of a Cajun family living in the heart of New Orleans in The Big Easy. But Guillory also blames some Creoles themselves who are selling out to the Cajun hype for better exposure. He points out Rockin' Dopsie & the Cajun Twisters as an example. "I think his only reason in naming his zydeco group 'The Cajun Twisters' is to reach white groups. Damn the culture, damn the background, as long as I can prostitute myself for money."

According to Nick Spitzer, a folklorist with the Smithsonian Institution, the term "Creole" as applied to Creoles in this part of Louisiana cannot be considered hard and fast. But, as he writes in the publication Sing Out!, it is "rather elastic in its reference to culture, language, food, perceived ancestry, music, architecture, etc." of a French-speaking people in Louisiana. Creole mixed ancestry, he says, may include black slaves from the Caribbean and American South Free people of color (gens libres de couleur), as well as Spanish, French and German planters and merchants, local Indian tribes, Anglo-Americans and Cajuns.

Creoles and Creoles actually do have a lot in common culturally, though not genetically. According to USL history professor Brad Pollock, of Creole origin, this is why there is such a difference between New Orleans Creoles and local Creoles. Pollock describes the difference between the groups as urban versus rural Creoles.

"The New Orleans Creole population is very unique because it's very old and because it's connected to France," says Pollock. "New Orleans is a port city, and during the French Colonial period, New Orleans kept in touch with France. So the Creole population in New Orleans has a tradition of having more contact with France and also having an educated elite because of Creoles living in the ci-
ty and having contact with people with educated backgrounds from France." Whereas in Acadia, Pollock says, the Creole culture and the Cajun culture overlapped to some degree later, around the 1850s. Large segments of both groups were poor until recently, so foods were similar because both groups lived under similar economic conditions. Both Creoles and Cajuns had French influences, both lived in the same area (especially around Lafayette) and both were poor. Despite racism and segregation, the cultures merged.

So, who's gumbo is it?

"One of the interesting things to me is if you look at gumbo," says Pollock. "Particularly in New Orleans and even in Haitian gumbo, you'll always find okra in those. In fact, the word 'gumbo' is from the West African Akan language and means okra. But if you talk to people about Cajun gumbo, some will say it definitely doesn't have okra and some will say it doesn't matter."

Pollock says this suggests two things: That Lafayette area Creole and Cajun cultures have blended, but that the two cultures have differences in taste. "Even if it's so old it's been forgotten, because of their African background, there's a Creole taste for okra in gumbo, like African fish stew with okra."

Pollock says because the term gumbo itself has roots in Africa and because it is eaten by Creoles in other places, one can make an argument that gumbo was a Creole dish that Cajuns adopted. But with other things, such as the area's indigenous music and language, origins are less clear because of the crossover between the two cultures.

One of the best examples here is zydeco music. In the wake of Clifton Chenier, zydeco music has generally been considered to be of the Creoles, yet the first recorded black Acadian music, made in the 1920s by Amade Ardoin, the "father of zydeco," was almost indistinguishable from those made at the same time by Joseph Falcon and other white Cajuns, according to Atholite Records president Chris Strachwitz. Today, the individual repertoire and style of zydeco musicians may be either more Cajun, more Afro-American or more Afro-Caribbean.

"Although West Indian influences on Louisiana culture can be traced in language, foods and folk beliefs, and particularly in music, it is important to note that a music called zydecos [zydeco], or sounding exactly like zor dico did not exist in the French West Indies," writes Nick Spitzer. "This again points to the importance of contact between Cajuns and black Creoles in generating this form of music unique to Louisiana."

Clearly, however, anyone who has lived in this area long enough can discern major differences between the two genres of music. Herbert Wilz of CREOLE says a committee to distinguish between zydeco and Cajun music has been discussed. But can rigid distinctions be made? Can Cajun and Creole food ever be separated? Can zydeco and Cajun music be segregated?

Who's gumbo is it?

Wilbert Guillory is a light complected, distinguished-looking Creole. He was born and raised in the area around Church Point. His 85-year-old father, Clifton, is still active enough to drive and treat patients. Neither Clifton nor Wilbert are sure of their ancestry. Clifton does know that his grandfather fled Louisiana during the Civil War because he feared being made a slave in the event the South should win the war. Clifton's father was born in Haiti and came to Louisiana when he was 12 years old. "They just took a chance going to Haiti," recalls Clifton. "They knew it was all black people there."

In Guillory's Zydeco Festival office in an abandoned Catholic school building in Opelousas, he talks to an interviewer beneath a poster of Africa with a huge black crucifix superimposed on it. "I think blacks are survivors because it goes all the way back to being given the Bible to be controlled, but we still found the heart of the Bible. Until I was a grown man, I thought Jesus was a white man because I never connected him with an image of God with myself. Even the religion was racist because they showed us all the saints were white."

Guillory says he can better deal with white racism against Creoles now, but he feels that, especially as a result of racism—black man not even being able to identify with his own God—there is a need today for "blacks" to discover their roots. "Even if they have to go to the cemetery to find them," says Guillory.

But what has also ripped pride and identity from Creoles has been racism among themselves. When Guillory was growing up, once he and another light Creole went to a dance in the Mallet area with three other guys who were "full black."

"We had to pay 25 cents to get in at the school," recalls Guillory. "They told us [he and the other light Creole] they'd let us in, but not the other three. We said, 'Well, our friends get to get in, too.' So instead of fighting with us, they let us in. But then they stopped the musicians from playing.

"So we left but it was a big thing for us because we broke the dance! We felt good. I'll never forget the name of the guy who was at the door."

Rebecca Henry, a friend of Wilbert Guillory's, lives in Opelousas. She's 48 years old and remembers well the "high yellowies," as Creoles nicknamed the "mixed" blood mulattoes around Leonville, who had more status than those of darker skin like herself. "Even in church we had to sit in the back, whereas the whites sat in the front and the mulattoes sat in the middle," Henry says.

Henry says all that has changed drastically now. For example, marriages of people with lighter and darker skins are common. "But at that time, there was no such animal."

Wilbert Guillory believes from personal experience that Creole prejudice among Creoles stems from white values. "I think white folks taught us that light skin is better than dark. We were taught that. And we're [now] messed up mind. The white man taught us to hate ourselves."

Even though racism between whites and Creoles and between Creoles and Creoles has diminished greatly over the years, it is difficult for a subculture of a suppressed culture to get the support necessary for a cultural renaissance to occur. In that respect, it may be much harder for the Creole culture to turn its self-image around as the Cajun culture has done. "The black community as a whole has been suppressed and denigrated, and some blacks see placing an emphasis on Creole culture as another division in the black community," says
Pollock. “It’s like, ‘Hey, we haven’t even gotten people to accept black pride yet, and you talk about Creole pride.’”

Pollock thinks it’s not simply that the Cajuns are getting credit for things Creole as much as it is that Creoles aren’t getting credit for things Creole.

“There’s not so much wrong with Cajun exposure, but the Creole culture isn’t getting the same kind of play,” says Pollock. “If there is a problem, I think that’s where the problem is.”

Meanwhile, as a result of this confusion, integration of cultures and lack of education, the Creole culture is suffering. Pollock believes that if Creoles had something similar to CODOFIL, with Creole language teachers, for example, reviving the Creole language would be a real possibility. However, he thinks it’s got to happen soon—at least within the next decade.

The organization CCREOLE was formed in 1986 after a small group of local Creoles became more aware of their international brothers and sisters during the first Festival International de Louisiane. The main reason Creoles in this area have remained so disconnected with their past is that Creole history, unlike Cajun history, has never been documented to any great extent in a manner that is available to Creoles. Students don’t read about Creoles in Louisiana history class. Students aren’t offered Creole language at USL. With the exception of some Smithsonian research, the amount of documentation and research on the Creole culture in this area is embarrassing.

As an organization, CCREOLE hopes to identify who Creoles are as a people through an understanding of Creole background, then extend that knowledge to their children. To overcome the obstacle of history books for educational purposes, CCREOLE is tapping into its roots by direct experience—educational exchange programs with Creoles from other communities throughout the world, such as Haiti, Martinique, La Reunion and Guadeloupe.

As a result of such exchanges, a renewed sense of Creole pride is already being experienced among CCREOLE members. John Broussard, treasurer of the organization, used to always speak only English at his job as County Supervisor for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farmer’s Home Administration. Now he is speaking Creole French with business associates when possible and at home more with his father, Clarence Broussard. “The other party on the phone feels as excited speaking the Creole French as I do,” says Broussard. “It’s realizing who I am, that I have some Creole impact in life. I enjoy it.”

And a cultural turnaround has already started to happen. It may be slow and awkward—like a necklace worn with a backwards African continent, a 10-member-strong CCREOLE organization, a black crucifix on a poster in the Zydeco Festival office, and now, an ongoing project between USL, Indiana University and the French government for an international Creole dictionary—but it’s emerging.

“It’s an exciting time,” says Herbert Wiltz. “Because it’s developing us. We’re breaking out of our shell.”