NEW ORLEANS (AP) - A nationally known expert in folkways says the people trying to protect Louisiana's unique Cajun culture may be helping to destroy it.

Alan Lomax, a folklorist, college lecturer and author, says the late 20th century has been a time of trouble for Cajun French.

"I was horrified to discover that Cajun French was being carried on by non-Cajun speakers," he said.

That would be equivalent to having English, if it were a second language, being taught here by graduates of Oxford," Lomax said.

But critics like Lomax say CODIFIL could cause as much harm as it has done good if the organization doesn't get over its bias against Cajun French as opposed to standard French.

"Do we teach redneck English? You cannot teach a culture without teaching the language," said Lomax.

"I think the Cajuns of south Louisiana are non-Cajuns who are being taught Cajun French," he said.

"The Cajuns of south Louisiana are descended from French-speaking Acadians who in the 18th century were expelled from what is now the Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

But the French spoken by Louisiana Cajuns is considerably different from the language spoken in Paris or Quebec. They had common roots but evolved under different conditions.

"A good number of Cajun schools and programs have been established to preserve and promote Cajun culture," Lomax said.

"Some of the most interesting features of Cajun culture are actually American Indian in origin," he said.

Lomax, who has written a number of books on folk culture, is a founder of the archives of American folk songs in the Library of Congress. In the 1930s, he began working with folk songs and folk culture with his father, pioneer folklorist John Lomax.

"I think that Louisiana is the richest of all American states culturally," Lomax said in a telephone interview from his office in New York.

He participated recently in a folklore seminar at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette and talked about his concern with CODIFIL.

That visit led to an exchange of letters between Lomax and Domengeaux.

"I've written my personal letter to him," Domengeaux said about what he's just been doing. "I'm just looking for publicity. His opinions don't influence me, and I don't think they influence the faculty of Columbia University either."

Domengeaux said CODIFIL gets about $2,150,000 a year from the state and pays about 250 foreign instructors in the public schools to teach French.

"When CODIFIL started 12 years ago, there was not one certified teacher of French in Louisiana," he said.

"Do we teach redneck English? You can teach anything but standard French if you want save this language," Lomax said.

But Lomax and other critics say the language Domengeaux is trying to save is not the Cajun language.

In a letter to Domengeaux, Lomax said: "Proper French is merely one form of French, intrinsically no better than any other. We are not speaking here of the way the language is written, but the way it is used in conversation."

"Language does not consist merely of a string of syllables that may be written down and printed. It is a living, flowing organism, and Cajun by its long life in Louisiana, subject to many cultural influences, assumes a distinctive shape that is now very much appreciated by many educated people."

Lomax also rejected the argument that there are no native French teachers in Louisiana.

"I think there are plenty of Cajun speakers now who are qualified to teach in the schools," Lomax said.

"If cultivated people in France knew about what was happening, they would be upset," he said.

Lomax said he tried to visit with Domengeaux, but was turned away.

He also said that any weakening of the Cajun language also would affect Cajun music which has recently come into its own as an accepted folk art, drawing fans from around the world.

"It would be a shame if Louisiana lost Cajun music as it lost jazz. Though New Orleans originated jazz, it lost it commercially and culturally, and I think this could happen with Cajun music," he said.