Lomax At Odds With CODOFIL

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NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A nationally known expert in Louisiana Cajun culture fears the state is making a big mistake.

Alan Lomax, a folklorist, says the state makes a big mistake in relying on instructors from France, Belgium and Canada to teach French in the public schools.

"I was horrified to discover that the program was being carried into action by non-Cajun speakers," he said.

Lomax, a research associate at Columbia University in New York, said the effects from such a program are subtle but threatening.

"You have a genuine mixture of folk style that could be disturbed and possibly distorted forever if the wrong style is employed in the schools," he said.

Many South Louisiana people in their late 30s or older can still remember being punished by teachers for speaking French at school. Cajuns were considered second-class citizens.

But that's changed quite a bit in recent years, and it's popular once again to speak Cajun French. "Some of the most interesting features of Cajun songs are actually American Indian," Lomax said.

But critics like Lomax say CODOFIL 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.

Created by the state legislature in 1968, CODOFIL, which directs French instruction in the public schools, lost jazz. Though New Orleans originated jazz, it lost it commercially and culturally, and Lomax said this could happen with Cajun music. "It's a shame if Louisiana lost Cajun music as it lost jazz," he said.

"Language teaching as it has been handled treats the Cajun culture as a second-class culture. That would make all American cultures second-class, and I resent that," Lomax said.

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

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

"I've written my personal letters to him," Domengeaux said, "but he's just looking for publicity. His opinions don't influence me. I don't think they influence the faculty of Columbia University either."

Domengeaux said CODOFIL gets about $275,000 a year from the state and puts about 250 foreign instructors in the public schools to teach French.

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

"Do we teach redneck English? You cannot teach anything but standard French if you want to 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."

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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.

"A good number of stylistic qualities — how the language was spoken — seem to be derived from American Indian sources," Lomax said of Cajun French. "Some of the most interesting features of Cajun songs are actually American Indian."