What is Cajun?
Localfolkloristrelatesthesistoryoftheterm

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What exactly is a Cajun? This question comes on the tipsofmanytonguesinlightofthemascotcontroversy. According to Barry Ancelet, a professor in the foreign language department, there is no easy way to define a Cajun.

After Sieur de La Salle claimed Louisiana for France in 1682, the French began to settle the colony in 1699. A society of French colonials developed who called themselves Creole, meaning "home grown, not imported," thereby distinguishing themselves from the immigrants. Eventually, Acadians arrived in South Louisiana around 1785. Cajun was the term derived from Acadians, therefore establishing an identity for themselves.

Ancelet said, "They isolated themselves to re-establish their society along the bayous and on the prairies where they created a melting pot of their own."

By the 19th century, Germans, Spaniards, Italians, Irish and the United States had influenced the French culture, creating what is known today as Cajun. The descendants of African slaves also added to the Southern Louisiana culture, identifying themselves as Creole.

He added, "I know of virtually no dark-skinned people in South Louisiana that identify themselves as Cajun. In fact, they go to great lengths to let you know they are not Cajun."

One example Ancelet gave was the difference in Zydeco musicians. According to Ancelet, the singer Buckwheat Zydeco refused to perform in any musical event that identified Buckwheat as Cajun. In most cases he said, many people tolerate the term Cajun for promotional purposes, such as for movies and restaurants.

Both the Cajuns and Creoles borrowed from each other's cultures, but still remained themselves.

"The word Cajun doesn't have anything derogatory in itself. It's not like other ethnic slurs or hurtful terms. It is simply what the Cajuns call themselves, and it doesn't have any inherent negative values unless you perceive it to be negative."

Ancelet stressed that the whites identify themselves as Cajun, whereas the black community identifies themselves as Creole.

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"From a black Creole point of view, the word Cajun is often perceived to be negative," he said. "It's basically the equivalent of 'poor, white, French-speaking trash.' That's why the many members of black Creole communities are reacting against it. There were slaves, but there were also black Creoles that owned slaves. It was a very complex and stratified society. Before the Civil War, there were also many black Creoles that had a much higher standing than the Cajun family farmers."

Ancelet said he feels strongly about the issue over the mascot situation. "If we all knew more about the past, how we got to be this way and who we are, the cultural and historical revolution that got us to this point, we would all understand better who we are now and where to go in the future."